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THE WAY TO VICTORY

VOLUME ONE: THE MENACE

PHILIP GIBBS

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THE WAY TO VICTORY

VOLUME ONE: THE MENACE

PHILIP GIBBS

THE WAY TO VICTORY

BY

PHILIP GIBBS

Author of "The Struggle in Flanders," "The Battles of the Somme," "The Soul of the War," etc.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME ONE

THE MENACE

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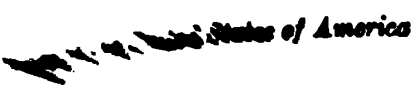

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THE MENACE

THE WAY TO VICTORY

INTRODUCTION

In my last book of collected dispatches—"From Bapaume to Passchendaele"—I dealt first with the German retreat after the Somme battles to the shelter of their Hindenburg line; then with the Arras battles which began with a striking victory and petered out into minor actions when our troops, with grim perseverance and no light losses, continued to hold German divisions so that the French might strike more freely elsewhere; and, in the third part, with the battles in Flanders—those muddy, bloody battles of last year—ending with the capture of the ridges. All that fighting, so heroic, so costly, so disappointing as it seemed in its immediate and apparent results when in March and April of this year, 1918, the enemy came sprawling back over all the ground we had gained, must be remembered in order to understand the happenings that followed—the incomplete success of the Cambrai adventure in November, the great retreat in March, the arrival of the Germans on the Marne with their dreadful threat to Paris, and the strategy of the French *Generalissimo,* the fine genius of Foch, so patient in his waiting for the moment to strike back, so terrific when he struck, leading up to the glorious recovery and victories of the British armies in August and September. For in war as in normal life there are no isolated facts. Nothing happens that is not the direct consequence of previous events and conditions, and that does not lead like a chain of fate to results that follow by inevitable laws. The lack of complete success of the French

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1917. It was a daring plan ingeniously imagined and brilliantly planned, and the only weakness of it was that it had to be carried out by troops who had already been fighting in hard battles so that they needed rest, and that no strong reserves could be spared to follow through the first advance to gain the fullest advantage of first success and hold the captured ground against heavy counter-attacks. Our Third Army had to cut their coat according to their cloth, and there was no margin to spare. Everything depended on surprise, and to achieve that was the task of the Tank Corps. It was to be the supreme test of the Tanks, which in the mud swamps of Flanders had had no chance at all though they had done gallant and desperate things there. For the first time they were to be used in large numbers in a wide battle array, and the enormous interest of the experiment was whether they could do away with the necessity of long preliminary bombardment—for the breaking of wire and trenches—which until then had prevented all surprise attacks on a big scale. The Hindenburg line was in front of them with 14-foot trenches protected by wide belts of wire utterly impassable by infantry unless cut through for their passage. If the Tank Corps failed it would be almost a death-blow to the hopes of their enthusiasts. If they succeeded it would revolutionize our warfare and bring back the possibility of surprise and strategy which had been killed for a time by aeroplane observation, and by the registration of guns warning the enemy of our concentrations against him. They succeeded gloriously. They broke through the Hindenburg line and cruised out into the open, and our infantry followed through the gaps, and we saw open warfare again with troops moving beyond the shelter of trenches, and cavalry patrols scouring through captured villages and rounding up large numbers of prisoners; and for war correspondents there were great scenes to watch and describe more easily than in other battles—those of Flanders—where the view was more limited by intense shell-fire, and trench systems, and concrete

pill-boxes stop. For a little while it looked as though we should get Cambrai, but the inability of the cavalry to sweep through on the first day in full strength gave the enemy time to recover from his frightful shock and to bring up his reserves for the defence of Bourlon Wood, Mœuvres, and Fontaine Notre Dame, when our men were becoming exhausted by their long fatigue with few reserves behind them to relieve or support them. The bad luck of the cavalry was a poignant disappointment to every cavalry officer and man eager to ride out into the blue and to prove that they are of supreme value in modern warfare when their moment comes. It was no fault of their spirit that they did not succeed to the full. The breaking of the bridge at Masnières by one of the Tanks, and the difficulty of finding a crossing there, caused the first delay in the orders for the cavalry to ride beyond Ribecourt where many squadrons had gathered. But the chief hindrance was the enemy's success in holding a line of trenches known as the Rumilly switch line. It had been unoccupied after our first break through the Hindenburg line, but there was a race for it by German infantry and ours, and the enemy running towards it from Cambrai won. The taking of this switch line was considered a preliminary condition by the cavalry generals, and when it was reported to them that it had not fallen they issued orders cancelling the plans of advance. Some Canadian cavalry—the Fort Garry Horse—and some of our dragoons rode ahead, not receiving these orders, and had amazing adventures, and elsewhere various cavalry units fighting mounted and dismounted did gallant work, but the great cavalry drive did not happen, and Cambrai did not fall. There is some evidence that one or two of our patrols actually rode into this town—it comes from German sources as well as our own—but if so it was only on a forlorn hope. Nevertheless the first phase of the adventure in the Cambrai salient was a fine success and fully justified its plan. Apart altogether from the taking of many thousands of prisoners, and the breaking of

the Hindenburg line, which was a sharp blow to the pride of the German command, it proved that hundreds of Tanks could be assembled secretly in spite of aeroplane observation, moving at night and taking careful cover, and that there were wonderful possibilities of surprise and victory by this means. All would have been well if we had been able to hold the captured ground, and there would have been no irony in the ringing of the joy bells in London. But within ten days the enemy came back upon us with a tiger's pounce. Using our own methods of assembling troops secretly by night, and not revealing his intentions by any preliminary bombardment or registration of guns, he launched a powerful attack on the right flank of the salient we had created and broke through it. It still seems a mystery to the British peoples. They still imagine that some fearful secret lurks behind all this in spite of all the details given by myself and other war correspondents. That one of our generals should have been caught in his pyjamas seemed to them incredible, and for some queer reason that simple fact stuck in their minds and seemed to confirm their worst suspicions, though I know many officers who have slept many times in their pyjamas in trench dug-outs without mishap and closer to the enemy than this general, whose headquarters were at that time far behind the front line. There is no mystery about that set-back in the Cambrai salient, and I have told the facts in full detail. Owing to the long strain upon our man-power throughout the Flanders fighting, the heavy losses which had not been made up from home, and the utter need of rest by divisions who had suffered most, there were few men available to relieve the divisions who were in line round the salient, or to strengthen them by support in depth. Some of the same divisions who captured Havrincourt and Trescault and the Flesquières Ridge, Masnières, Marcoing, and Gonnelieu on November 20 were holding the lines there on November 30, and were thinly strung out. The 55th Division on the right, very much below strength after a long period of fight-

ing, held a front of 13,000 yards chiefly by a series of posts and strong points, and that is an enormous length of front for any one division, while behind them there was very little in support in case of need. The enemy gained his surprise, and when without any preliminary warning of artillery registration, or any unusual movement seen by air-scouts in daylight, he launched his attack in great strength he was able to pierce through our right flank and strike up to Gouzeaucourt before our headquarters staffs were aware that they were in danger. Telephone wires were cut, outposts were surrounded, and German machine-gunners pushed through the gaps and worked forward rapidly. The defence of Masnières and Marcoing by the 29th Division, and of La Vacquerie further south, were astounding episodes of human courage which should never be forgotten in history, though so few people remember, now or know how, those men of ours fought until in some places only a few living remained among their dead, and yet even then some of these boys, haggard, blood-stained, wounded, weak, under dreadful fire fought on to the last gasp, or fell back still fighting rearguard actions. In this book I tell that story, and what I tell is true. The enemy losses without exaggeration were immense, especially in the northern side of the salient, and the price he paid was too great for driving us part of the way back, leaving us still on high ground which he wanted. But our losses were heavy, too, and in a few months we badly wanted those men and any men.

It was in those few months between December and March that a menace of dreadful things crept on apace against us until at last it flamed up against our lines, and we were in greater danger than we have ever been. Division by division the Germans transferred their troops from Russia to the Western Front. Our Intelligence, which was really wonderful throughout this time, knew of their movement and arrival, week by week and month by month. They knew and added up the figures and wrote their warnings

to be on guard. In January there were 183 German divisions on the Western Front, about equal to the Allied strength at that time. In March there were 207 German divisions, giving the enemy a superiority of something like 150,000 bayonets. It is true that the Americans were coming along, but those who were in France were not yet fully trained to take part in the battle-line, and it was not until after our retreat that the tide across the Atlantic bore a rush of men which swelled into the great army which has now achieved its first victories. So we were immensely outnumbered. We were outnumbered on the Western Front as a whole, and presently it became evident, or at least probable, that the main shock of the German offensive would in the first place come against the British front. The evidence for this increased day by day. Our flying scouts reported abnormal movements of troops on railways and roads far back behind the German lines. They reported new aerodromes established opposite our front, new hospitals and field-ambulances, as though bloody battles were expected, new ammunition dumps everywhere. Prisoners taken in our raids repeated the rumours in the German trenches of an offensive on so vast a scale that it would crush the British Army for all time and cut it off on the coast, while the victorious German army swung and rolled up the French southwards to Paris and beyond. Many German soldiers did not believe all this possible. They refused to be doped by the wild words of their officers and by the veiled prophecies of their Press. But they believed that it would be attempted, and that the German militarists would stake everything on this last great gamble to secure victory and peace. In the German Press, and in propaganda for neutral countries, many sinister things were written with intent to hearten German sympathisers and strike terror among their enemies. There were blood-curdling stories of a new gas so horrible in its widespread power of death that the Kaiser had only been persuaded to allow its use when the Empress besought him on bended knees to

save their people by this means. There were dark hints that the world would be staggered as never before by the march of events which would end in the complete triumph of the German armies, and the abject surrender of France and Britain. We could afford to ignore those fantastic tales, but behind them was the real truth of an assembling power which would test our defences to the uttermost, and the psychology of a people sick to death of victories which achieved no end, aghast at their losses and increasing ruin, but dragged and panting with the hope that by a last supreme effort peace might be imposed upon their enemies. It is curious that in spite of the accumulating evidence of enormous preparations for attack against our front, and the warning of our Intelligence Corps who gathered this knowledge and analysed it, and weighed it with careful judgment, and co-ordinated a mass of minute facts all leading to the same conclusion, there were many people well informed of all this who refused to believe that it amounted to anything more than gigantic bluff. Mr. Bonar Law was not the only sceptic. The rank and file of the Army was itself divided in opinion about the reality of the threat. I talked to many distinguished officers at the Front, in view sometimes of the German lines so quiet over there, so suspiciously quiet, who had many reasons to give for the explaining away of the evidence of impending attack on a mighty scale. The intensive training in open warfare which was being practised by German storm troops seventy kilometres behind their lines, was only what our troops had to do when they came out of the line. The increase in ammunition dumps was due to precautions for defence. They would never dare to attempt frontal attacks against our entrenched positions which were marvellously strong and practically impregnable. And so on. For my part going round our lines with the eye of an amateur our defences did not seem so strong as all that, especially on the right of the line north and south of St.-Quentin, and we seemed to be holding the line rather thinly.

The men from one end of the line to the other were contemptuous of all German menaces. They had a magnificent optimism in their powers of defence, and in the strength of their lines. They were sure that if the enemy attacked in masses he would be slaughtered in masses. They had that cheery confidence which has never deserted the British soldier throughout this war, except in hours of supreme tragedy, and has been the cause of some of our weakness and of most of our strength. The French armies, as far as I could get a glimpse of their opinion, seemed to think that if the German offensive materialized, half its strength at least would break against them. But when it began it was the full weight which struck us hard. It was the weight of overwhelming numbers of German storm troops highly trained in new methods of open warfare, in which our men were inexperienced, armed with a fantastic number of machine-guns, and supported by heavy concentrations of artillery. The German storm troops were arranged in depth on a narrow front, divisions passing through divisions, and others following on behind and again passing through, so as to maintain the first impetus, keep up the pace of advance, and relieve the foremost troops, who then fell behind for rest and reorganization until their turn came again to go forward and pass through the most advanced ranks. It was a method we had adopted on a small scale at Wytschaete and Messines with absolute success. But the enemy was able to do it on a large scale, on a scale of man-power never seen before in the history of war. They attacked us with 114 divisions against 48, that is nearly 800,000 bayonets against something over 300,000, reckoning a division on both sides at 7000 in bayonet strength. That is all the mystery there is behind our retreat in March. Undoubtedly mistakes were made during the progress of the retreat which is, I suppose, one of the most difficult operations in war. The difficulty of keeping touch with corps and divisional staffs when all wires were down and everything was in a state of flux,

after the first break through must have led now and then to confusion, delay in command, lack of contact between one body of troops and another, of which the enemy with great skill and audacity was quick to take advantage. It is possible that among the troops themselves, faced often with the horrible danger of having both their flanks exposed by wide gaps between them and the troops on either side of them, there was at times extreme fear of being cut off for ever, so that they may have fallen back too rapidly from lines which they might have held, and that here and there among inexperienced men there was something like panic. It would be ridiculous to suppose that in a retreat like this incidents of that kind did not happen, and that all our officers did the right thing at the right time—and every time—and that all our men were so indifferent to their peril that they did not "have the wind up," as they call it, in the worst places and the worst hours. If they had been like that they would not have been human, and the British soldier is very human. But the truth remains and will remain for ever that against overwhelming pressure and in the most difficult conditions of war, with men fighting day after day without sleep or rest, until at last they were mere dazed and stumbling wrecks upheld only by the last flicker of their spirit, our Third and Fifth Armies retreated without anything like a general panic, fought heroic rear-guard actions all the way, inflicted frightful losses on the enemy, held their lines intact at their journey's end, and defeated the enemy's purpose of driving between us and the French and putting us out of action. The courage of the men was put to the supreme test of endurance, and most of them did not fail. Notwithstanding bitter tragic losses held out until [illegible] brought the enemy to a halt on the lines of the Ancre and the Somme. They were the men of the divisions who in the months of August and September of [illegible] drove the enemy back to his old Hindenburg [illegible] November, over many miles of country, storming [illegible] village after village, fighting a battle every

day and going on again the next day, and defeating for ever the German hopes of victory. But looking back on March 21, and the weeks that followed, one remembers them as a nightmare. Truly for a time it seemed as though the bottom had fallen out of the world, our world, and that all the sacrifice of our men, all the agonies of our years of war, might end after all in defeat or something like it. For the enemy had broken through lines which many of us had believed to be impregnable, and was almost at the gate of Amiens, threatening an advance to Abbeville and the coast, and he was still very strong in numbers of men, and we were very weak. Up in Flanders Rupprecht of Bavaria was sitting down with many fresh divisions in his command, and we had few troops to hold him back when his time came to strike. They were not good days, and worse were to follow.

The enemy's first success in breaking our lines was due to a new method of attack which has since been known as "infiltration." It consisted in taking immediate advantage of any weakness or gap in his enemy's line by concentrating troops in depth at that part, and forcing them through until they had gone far enough to threaten the flanks of the troops on either side of them, who at the same time were being attacked frontally and were, therefore, concentrated upon their forward defences. Sometimes only a few men with machine-guns would make their way through, under cover of a sunken road, or an old communication trench, or foggy weather, but at a signal that they had established a post there, other machine-gunners and riflemen would make their way to them stealthily and push a little further forward and get further support in numbers, until their sweep of machine-gun fire on the flanks, and even in rear of our troops, would have a serious effect upon their position and moral. For no troops in the world can ignore a threat upon their flanks, and fight frontally with any sense of security when there is hostile fire over their shoulder, and the enemy in unknown strength between them and

the troops with whom they are supposed to be in touch. That is exactly what happened on March 21 in more than one sector of our line. On the Third Army front that gallant division of Highlanders, the 51st, who have had an extraordinary history since that day, having already made their name at Beaumont Hamel in the old Somme battles, at Arras in April of '17, and in the Cambrai salient in November, were astride the Bapaume-Cambrai road, holding Boursies and Demicourt. On their right was the 17th Division, and on their left the 6th, two of the finest of our English divisions. Their battle defences were very strong and they were sure of them. On their left the defensive system was not so strong, and the first thing that was known of grave peril on the morning of March 21 was when Scottish officers, in battalion headquarters at Sole trench, down on their left flank by Louveral Wood, found the enemy close to them and surrounding them. The Germans under cover of mist had penetrated into the Quéant-Pronville valley, had filtered down it in increasing strength, and was turning the left flank of the 51st Division, held by the 6th and 7th Black Watch, and the right flank of the 6th Division, by driving this wedge between them and thrusting it deeper in by streams of machine-gunners. Their drive was south-east behind Boursies and Doignies, and although the 51st formed a defensive flank in a line called Sturgeon Avenue, east of Boursies—most of the Black Watch had been cut off in their system between the left boundary of the division and Rabbit Alley—the enemy's penetration continued by the wedge being driven deeper down, and he got into Doignies about two o'clock in the afternoon after heavy losses. His frontal attack against the 51st had made no ground at all, but this outflanking movement threatened them gravely. Doignies was retaken for a time, and then lost again, by men of the 19th Division, and the next day Morchies, on the left, which had been lost, was also retaken, but it was impossible to hold these places when the enemy broke through Vaux Vraucourt and again exposed

the left flank of the 51st and 19th Divisions. They had already fallen back to the Hermies switch, and on the night of the 22nd fell back again to the Ytres-Beugny line, and once again, out of touch with troops on either side, as the enemy was still outflanking them, to a line through Bancourt and Villers-au-Flos, on the east side of Bapaume. Soon afterwards the enemy was reported to be coming up to Le Transloy by way of Lebœuf and Morval, and the 51st Division with the 62nd, the 19th, the 41st, and the 6th were all in danger of being cut off, and only extricated themselves by rear-guard actions, often with the enemy on either side of the rear-guards, and desperate holding actions against unequal odds, while one body of troops fell through another and took turns in fighting. They killed great numbers of the enemy, but more came on and on, forcing their way like water into any gaps between bodies of our troops—and there were many gaps after the retreat had started owing to the extreme difficulty of keeping touch—and the German machine-guns were astonishing in the skill and courage with which they carried out this plan of "infiltration."

What happened on the Third Army front was happening in a more serious way down on our right, where the Fifth Army was holding the lines. A break happened between Gauchy and Itancourt, south of St.-Quentin and the southernmost end of our line at Barisis on the Oise. On the left of this sector of line was the 30th Division, with the 36th (Ulster) in the centre, the 14th on their right, and lower down below the German main thrust the 58th (London) Division. The foremost lines were held by battle positions formed by a series of redoubts in depth. One of those held by the Ulster men was the Race-course redoubt, on the site of the St.-Quentin old racecourse, with strong machine-gun positions behind in Gruchies valley. There was no regular system of trenches. The 30th Division on their left, made up of Manchester battalions, held from just north of the old Roman road to the St.-Quentin Canal, with Manchester Hill

redoubt and others in their forward positions, and behind them machine-gun positions at Roupy and the Epine-de-Dallon. The 14th Division on the right of the Ulstermen were at Urvillers and in front of Essigny. On March 21 it was a foggy morning, and all this country was so enshrouded in mist that it was impossible to see further than fifty yards ahead. That put all our rear machine-gun positions out of action until the enemy was close to them, preventing a long-range barrage which had been designed; and indeed nothing was known in these positions until the enemy was swarming round them. The first report received by the 30th Division was that the enemy had broken through on both sides of the Epine-de-Dallon and Manchester redoubt. The garrisons of those redoubts held out and fought to the death, as I have told in this book, but grave news came that the Germans had broken between the 14th and 30th Divisions and were attacking Essigny Station. They gained possession of Essigny and Contrescourt in spite of the desperate defence of the garrisons in the station redoubt at Essigny, and at the St.-Simon redoubt by the 61st Brigade of the 20th Division, put at the disposal of the 30th. That night all three brigades of the 30th crossed the St.-Quentin Canal, blowing up the bridges behind them, and the 61st Brigade, now joined with them, were ordered to hold the bridgeheads at Tugny and St.-Simon. But the enemy was still driving between the 30th and 36th (Ulster) Divisions, now utterly out of touch with each other, and a further withdrawal was ordered to the Somme defences. The 14th Division was outflanked completely, and there was no touch with it. In a steady drive the Germans thrust past the left flank of the Ulster men advancing from Jussy to Flavel-le-Martel, and finding a gap in our line at Esmery Hallon. This was filled for a time by 200 men from headquarters staffs, but the Ulstermen were compelled to retreat through Guiscard, and finally, after desperate actions in small bodies supported by French troops along the Villers-Bretonneux road until the division could only muster 300 fit men, they ended their re-

treat east of Amiens. In the early morning of March 24 the enemy broke into Ham, which had been held by the 89th Brigade of the 20th Division, with stragglers from other units and miscellaneous men from a corps school. On the same day the Germans had reached a line through Athies and Matigny, and their advanced patrols were threatening the crossings of the Somme at Brie, and were fighting round Péronne at Mont St.-Quentin. That was our most critical and perilous time. If the enemy were able to seize the Somme bridges to be blown up. As we have seen, the enemy best line of defence would be broken and our armies would be in the gravest jeopardy. Biaches-Brie and Sailly-Sallisel had to be held at all costs, and the bridge at Brie and other Somme bridges to be blown up. As we have seen, the enemy was advancing steadily between the Villers-Bretonneux and Roye roads, towards the crossing at St.-Christ against the retiring rear-guards of the 30th and 36th Divisions, with the 61st in support, while in the north the 2nd Division was fighting back to Bucquoy and Achiet to the old Somme battlefields near Hebuterne. The troops who were fighting back to the Somme crossings and trying to hold the enemy there below Péronne belonged to our 19th Corps, and were the 66th and 24th Divisions, with the 50th in reserve on March 21. On the opening day of the battle they had been holding the line from Gouzeaucourt, in the north, to Maissemy, on the left of the 30th Division above St.-Quentin. What happened to the divisions below them happened also to them. The enemy attacked with five divisions in depth and two in reserve, drove heavily through the line to Templeux Gerard, north-west of Hargicourt, and captured that village. On the second day they attacked Le Verguier, where the Queen's fought to the death, and having taken Vendricourt Château, after desperate fighting, pressed heavily between Ervillay and Vermand. Ten of our Tanks and the 15th Hussars dismounted, came to the support of our infantry, but meanwhile a violent attack on their left at Villers-Faucon caused a break in the line through the 16th

(Irish) Division, and turned the flank of the 19th Corps. With our 2nd Cavalry Division, including the 4th Dragoon Guards, 9th Lancers, and 17th Lancers, they had hard fighting at Roisel, and then fell back across the Somme, where the 8th Division was holding the line. Most of the bridges were blown up, but apparently one at St.-Christ was not destroyed, and there is some doubt whether the bridge at Brie was effectively broken in time to prevent a German crossing. On the morning of March 25 two German divisions attacked between St.-Christ and Falvy, and men of the 66th Division and others were forced back to Morchain and Mesnil. The Somme crossings had been lost, and the worst happened. The enemy had a clear road open to him on the way to Amiens, and all our troops had to fall back rapidly lest they should be encircled and cut off. Behind the line of the Somme, round about Péronne and Roye, on the way back to Amiens and Albert, many of our old trenches had been filled up, here and there agriculture had been started again under the direction of British officers—I shall never forget the retreat of the steam-rollers and reaping-machines from that district. We lay open to the enemy's advance, and it was only their heavy losses and exhaustion after their rapid progress which brought them to a halt outside Villers-Bretonneux and Albert—that and the grim defence of weak units from many divisions who held some sort of a line until the Australians and New Zealanders, followed by the French, were rushed up to their support. For a while Amiens was defended only by a thin screen of tired troops, among whom on the right of our line were stragglers, signallers, orderlies, clerks, dismounted cavalry, and other odd units known as Carey's Force, because of the officer sent down to command them, and for a day and night at least it looked as though poor Amiens were doomed. Albert had already fallen, and the enemy had all the old battlefields of the Somme in his clutch again. They were dark days, and to those of us who were in the midst of all this

there was no comfort but in faith and courage, and they were strained.

There was a sad night in Amiens. It was a night of white moonlight so coldly glittering that the pinnacles and buttresses of the Cathedral were like silver, and the old houses of the city with their steep roofs and plaster walls were clear-cut under the stars, and flooded with that white light except where their shadows were inky black. We were sitting with many officers at dinner in the Hôtel du Rhin at half-past seven in the evening, after coming back through Albert, where dead men and dead horses lay about the ruins, and small bodies of British troops, utterly exhausted after their days of retreat, were awaiting attack. There was no gaiety in that dining-room. The enemy was advancing on Amiens, and some of us knew that there was next to nothing to hold him back. The waiters—Gaston, the old soldier who knew more strategy it seemed than all our staff college, and appeared to have more courage than Cœur de Lion, and Joseph, with his cry of "C'est la guerre," and a philosophy of life which he expressed by cynical words ending in high-pitched laughter—were silent and scared. Gaston whispered over my shoulder, "Dites-moi, mon petit caporal"—he called me that because of some fancied likeness to the young Napoleon—"vous croyez que Amiens sera sauvé? Ils n'entreront pas?" I said, "They will never come into Amiens again," but there was a frightful doubt in my heart when I said so.

Next morning there was an exodus of the people of Amiens. The shopkeepers put their shutters up sadly because they had made much money from the British Army, and because the business of their life was gone, and their homes in the little parlours behind the counters must be abandoned. I saw the girl of the bookshop putting up her shutters. Her place of business had been a *salon* as well as a shop. Hundreds of British officers, thousands of them since the beginning of the Somme battles in July of '16, had come here to chat with this vivacious girl and her smil-

ing mother, who were full of wit and good-humour. She turned as I passed on the other side of the street and waved a hand in farewell, and I was struck by the look of courage she had. All the restaurants where there had been such gay little dinners in good days of the war, all the teas where young British officers had flirted with pretty girls and enjoyed a spell of civilization before getting back to the line, all the shops where they had made friends with the people who took their money, were closed up—if they were not knocked down—and Amiens became a deserted city into which presently large numbers of German shells came crashing, and where on the way to the line or back from it some of us ate our sandwiches in the wreckage of the public gardens, where great shell-holes gape and iron railings lay smashed, and trees lay across the flower-beds, and the silence of this abandoned city, which many of us had loved because of its old beauty and cheerful life, was broken only by the tramp of soldiers marching through. Is it perhaps to be counted unto the Germans for righteousness that they did not destroy the Cathedral by gun-fire? At any rate the glory of Amiens was hardly touched. Some rare command must have restrained them from that outrage. Amiens itself did not fall in spite of the rumour on the morning after that night of bombing that German cavalry were advancing down the Villers-Bretonneux road. The Australians on the north of the Somme, and the French on the south, arrived in time to relieve or support our weak forces, and Foch with splendid faith rejoiced the heart of France by saying, "I guarantee Amiens."

It was not the end of the ordeal for British troops. A new thunder-storm broke upon us in the north, where Rupprecht's army had been waiting to strike, and the enemy made a new tremendous effort to break through to the coast and drive us into the sea. Even now I think that was our worst peril and the period of our darkest days. It began on April 9 with an attack in great force between Fleurbaix and Givenchy against our 40th Division on the left at Fleurbaix,

our 55th on the right at Givenchy, and the Portuguese in the centre by Laventie and Neuve Chapelle. The Germans had concentrated a mass of artillery on this front, and they opened their attack with a barrage of appalling intensity and depth, while they fired long-range high-velocity guns at all our villages in back areas, as far back as Aire and St.-Pol, twenty miles or so away, and ranged upon our cross-roads and lines of communication. They blotted out the Portuguese front trenches and outposts, and then advanced into the centre of the line held by these troops with columns of infantry led by officers on horseback, and field-guns followed by transport. The Portuguese were unable to sustain the shock of this assault in overwhelming numbers and broke, falling back in hard retreat through Laventie and Richebourg-St.-Vast. Our centre, therefore, had been completely broken, but the wings still held, and Fleurbaix and Givenchy were defended with magnificent courage by the 40th and 55th Divisions, who caused the enemy enormous losses. As supporting troops to those two gallant divisions we had the 51st Highlanders, who had been sent up north for a rest after their terrible time in the retreat, and the 50th Division of Northumberland Fusiliers, East Yorks, and Durham Light Infantry; and for several weeks these men, joined later by some of the 25th Division, fought across the Lys, where the enemy forced the crossings, with a stubbornness which has never been surpassed in war. They fought continual rearguard actions against numbers of fresh German troops, before whom they were but scattered handfuls of desperate men. They fought until they were surrounded, and after they were surrounded until they could hardly stand for weariness, and were so thinned by losses that battalions were down to companies, and companies but little groups led by subalterns and sergeants, or grim souls among their own ranks who would not surrender, but went on fighting. The enemy crossed the Lys, stormed his way through Estaires and Merville, struck up to Steenwerck, surrounded Armentières, and entered Bailleul and Meteren,

while at the same time he swung down from the north against our 9th (Scottish) and 29th Divisions, and parts of the 19th and 25th Divisions, all very weak after many battles, and coming down over the Flanders ridges which we had gained by such sacrifice, regained Messines and Wytschaete, and advanced upon Kemmel. Later the 1st Australian Division which came down in a hurry towards the Amiens front, was turned back and sent into the line in front of La Moke, where they held the enemy, and during many weeks of stationary warfare inflicted great losses upon him. We were unable to send up reserves. But at the time of greatest peril we had no reserves to spare after our losses in the retreat over the Somme battlefields. Our Army was exhausted, and their only strength was the spirit of those men who responded to the call of the Commander-in-Chief to fight with their backs to the wall until help should come. There were bad things to see in those days, things which seared the heart of men familiar with the ways of war. For as I have told in this book the German advance across the Lys was so sudden that many old people and young girls and children were under the fire of their guns before they were convinced that they were menaced, and from scores of villages there was a hurried flight as in the first days of the war in Northern France and Belgium, and for long leagues the roads were crowded with these processions of fugitives, broken and homeless. Round the Mont-des-Cats and Bailleul I saw our batteries getting into action behind hedges and in back gardens, while young mothers were packing their children into perambulators, and old ladies wearing their best bonnets and black gowns, because that was the best way of saving them, left their cottages for ever—they have been pounded into dust and ashes—and scuttled down lanes and across fields where monstrous shells were bursting. One young girl in Robecque, which was then under fire, had such courage for the rescue of a little invalid sister and other children and a poor scared mother that I shall remember her as a heroine of France - one of many in the land. Our sol-

diers helped them as best they could, but they needed help themselves in this desperate time when we were weakest.

Help came to them. It came when they were literally at the last gasp, but just in time to avert a great disaster. The first that came was a big force of French cavalry—squadron after squadron of Dragoons—who rode hard for 120 kilometres from the south of Amiens to Flanders. I saw their lances tipped with the sun streaming through the lanes and villages between Abbeville and St.-Omer, and drove close to this long tide of horsemen and heard the panting of their beasts, and looked into their hard, grim, lean-jawed faces, all powdered with the dust of the roads which swept about them like smoke. Then between Amiens and the sea there came behind our line with magic speed a strong French army of infantry—picked troops and splendid men. They came in motor-lorries, 600 lorries in one column, and then more and more, day after day, all driven by little monkey-like men from Annam and Cochin China in steel helmets, and the blue of all these French uniforms, which was like a winding river behind our lines of khaki. It was good to see those men, to see them watering our horses behind our lines, to watch their transport with lean beasts and spider wheels crawling up the roads, and their huge guns go by, and a never-ending column of *soixante-quinze's* and bodies of French infantry in the shell-broken villages of Flanders ready for action. Our men had support at last, and there was strength instead of weakness between them and the sea. All troops have their unlucky days. Thus, though the first episode of French fighting in Flanders was the loss of Kemmel, the most important outpost of that line of hills which was the last barrier between the enemy and the coast, yet in heroic fighting later they held their line between Locre Hospice and the Scherpenberg, and the enemy could not pass. For a time the Germans were brought to a halt, and this breathing space gave us time to dig new lines of defence, line after line, which were seen by German airmen, so that Rupprecht of Bavaria knew that it would cost him rivers of

blood to break through now that the French were with us in strength. He waited for events elsewhere, keeping twenty-nine fresh divisions in reserve to strike us again when the French should be called away.

The scene of action shifted. This time it was the Crown Prince who struck, and the French who had to bear the brunt of a surprise attack. On May 27 the French front on the Aisne, between Soissons and Rheims, was stormed by twenty-five German divisions, supported by seventeen others, some of which came from the army of von Hutier. Four British divisions, the 15th, 8th, 21st, and 25th, all of whom had been heavily engaged in our battles since March 21, and had suffered many losses, were on the right of this line between Craonne and Berry-au-Bac, and it was not until dinner-time on the evening before the battle that their commanding officers had any inkling of impending attack. The enemy had assembled his troops and his guns with profound secrecy and gained the full effect of surprise. The French centre at the Chemin-des-Dames was broken, and the British troops on the right wing had to fall back with them after two hours of tremendous bombardment, followed by infantry attacks in depth. They fell back, blowing up the bridges, and the enemy pouring in fresh divisions against the French struck down past Fismes, and reached the Marne at Château Thierry on June 11 of this year 1918.

It was a blow at the heart of France, and a shiver passed through the French people and our people whose fate was bound up with theirs. During a few days of quietude on the British front I went by motor-car to Paris, and all the way from Beauvais, where in the early days of 1914 I heard the German guns coming close, and saw the deserted streets defended by broken glass and barbed wire, while a tall Cuirassier stood by the bridge waiting to blow it up; there were the same scenes of tragedy which I had hoped never to see again, with people packing up their household furniture and taking to the long trail of the roads to escape capture by the enemy. So it was past Meaux and Senlis, and the vil-

lages along the road to Paris. Dear God, it was sad to come to Paris again in a time like this! Once before I had entered Paris when the enemy was close to it, and walking its deserted streets, past its shuttered shops, up to the Etoile and the Arc-de-Triomphe, had prayed with a kind of passion that all this beauty might be spared, and that this great city, whose people I loved, might never be entered by an army of looters, nor suffer from the fury of their bombardment. That peril passed in September of 1914, when Foch struck on the Marne and the German tide was rolled back to the Aisne. But after four years of heroic effort Paris was threatened again. Once again many of its people had fled. Many of its shops were shut. And although there was more life in Paris than in that September of the first year of the war when it was a desert, it was easy to see the distress of the Parisians, the nervous tension which once more had put these people on the rack, and the sense of fearful expectation which brooded in every part of the city. I walked from the Rue St.-Honoré to the Boulevard St.-Germain, and to the top of the Rue Cherche Midi at eight o'clock on a sunny evening, and met only eight people. The people of Paris kept indoors and they had troubled hearts. A new menace had come to them. At the outset of the German attack a fantastic thing had happened. Shells fell into the city, killing women and children here and there, falling into a church and a babies' crèche. At the first explosions Paris said, "It is a daylight raid," but no aeroplane could be seen. *Le Temps* was the first to announce a long-range German gun, some new and devilish contrivance. "Fat Bertha" they called this beast lurking in the forest of Coucy, and after a time, according to the way of Paris, they made a joke of it, and when a shell burst I saw *midinettes* and shopkeepers running and laughing towards the place of the explosion. But the fear and threat that many other guns might fire on Paris made many people leave with their wives and children, and the shadow of the German army at Château-Thierry crept over Paris and stayed there on the faces

of its citizens. Foch waited. It was hard for him to wait because he believes that attack is the best defence. But he knew that his chance was coming, and that the Germans were playing into his hands if only he could get enough troops to strike. A powerful thrust between Montdidier and Noyon, with the object of striking down to Compiègne, had been thwarted by the stubborn defence of the French troops there, supported by an American division, which fought with splendid courage. The Germans had, therefore, left themselves in a deep salient below Soissons and Rheims, and they offered him weak flanks. After all their fighting against the British they had not many divisions in reserve except those in Rupprecht's army up north, and they believed Foch had so dissipated his strength that he could not take advantage of their dangerous geographical position. Foch had dissipated part of his army of reserve, that was true. He had hated to do so, guessing what was coming, but he had saved the coast by flinging up his men behind our lines at the last moment possible, and now he would bring them back again.

With the same magic by which they had appeared along the British front they disappeared. Those long columns of lorries driven by monkey-looking men tore back through the dust, and the cavalry rode their horses hard down the same roads, but the other way, and by rail and road the French guns travelled to their own front again. From the Vosges and from many parts of France, where they had been holding quiet sectors of the line or training in back areas, another army was on the move. American divisions of fresh and fine men came winding along the roads and lanes up to Meaux and Villers-Cotteret, moving by night, secretly. And down from the British front, very secretly too, went three British divisions, the 15th (Scottish), the 62nd (Yorkshires), and the 51st (Highlanders). The *Generalissimo* of the Allied Armies had reconstituted his reserves, and on July 20 he struck. During the worst time that had happened when the Germans were advancing to Château-

Thierry an English statesman was in Foch's headquarters, and he said to him:

"What do you think of the situation, sir?"

Foch was silent for a little while, and then he said with the utmost simplicity:

"I cannot help pitying Lüdendorff."

The English statesman was astounded, and then Foch said:

"His task is much more difficult than mine."

He had a prevision of his counterstroke and faith in his own judgment. He struck at the psychological moment, neither too soon nor too late, and the enemy was taken by surprise, and on both sides of the salient his lines were broken, and his crush of men inside the salient, all ready for the final blow on Paris, were caught between two pincers and forced to retreat or to surrender *en masse*. Westwards from Rheims, and eastwards below Soissons, and northwards across the Marne, the Allied Armies advanced fighting against desperate resistance, but breaking it and driving into the centre of the salient by Fêre-en-Tardenois. There were great captures in men and guns, and the Crown Prince cried for help to Rupprecht of Bavaria. Rupprecht had been clinging to his twenty-nine fresh divisions in reserve to deal us a death-blow, but the plight of the Crown Prince forced him to yield some of his troops, and as the Allied pressure became greater between the Marne and the Aisne he sent division after division to the Crown Prince's army, and the threat against us withered away, and our turn to strike was coming again.

It came on August 8, when the Tank Corps in full strength assembled in darkness and in cover of woods, north and south of the Somme, where on the north the Australians were in full order of battle, and on the south the whole of the Canadian corps had been transferred from the Arras district to the line outside Amiens, between Villers-Bretonneux and Hangard Wood, with the French on their right.

The greatest honour is due to the Australians. Ever

since their arrival on the Amiens line they had taken the offensive, and General Monagu, their corps commander, had fought a series of small and brilliant battles, which had gradually driven the enemy away from the approaches to Amiens itself. Now, after all that fighting they expressed themselves as willing and eager to begin an offensive movement on a big scale, and they proved very quickly that they had not cherished false illusions about their spirit and strength.

Having the bad luck to be ill in England at this time I missed the opening phases of our splendid recovery of the ground that had been lost during our retreat in March, and picked up the thread of history later when the enemy was in hard retreat to his Hindenburg line, pursued with untiring spirit by British troops to Bapaume, where I followed them on that morning, and across the Somme battlefields, where I went up to them at Longueval and Delville Wood which they had just captured, and round Péronne, where there was brilliant fighting by the Australians at Mont St.-Quentin. I am told by Canadian officers that the first morning of our offensive was an astounding sight as column after column of men moved out of the early morning mists in the wake of large numbers of Tanks, whose pilots and crews fought that day and for several days with wonderful gallantry, smashing down nests of machine-guns, rounding up bodies of German infantry, and taking all risks in forward positions from which they came under the fire of German anti-Tank guns which knocked some of them out by direct hits. It was open warfare on a grand scale, real open warfare of an old-fashioned kind, and masses of cavalry with their pennons flying and their lances in rest streamed across country in a wonderful pageant, riding through the ruined villages, cutting off small woods and copses in which Germans were still serving their machine-guns, and reconnoitring the enemy's rear-guards. The Canadian brigades advanced in depth, brigade passing through brigade in the country north of the Amiens-Roye

road, and breaking through the lines which the enemy tried to hold by machine-gun power cleared a wide territory, including the ruined villages of Bouchoir and Le Quesnoy and Damery, close to the town of Roye itself, where they were joined by the French. North of them the Australians were equally triumphant and captured a large tract of country south and north of the Somme until they were on the outskirts of Péronne after hard and, here and there, costly fighting. North of the Australians, English, Scottish and Welsh divisions on the west side of the Ancre by Albert, with the gallant New Zealand division whose record of progress had been wonderful in its rapidity and staying power, and as other British troops far north as the banks of the Scarpe outside Arras began to move, and then throughout the remaining weeks of August and the beginning of September fought a continuous battle, driving the enemy back from one position to another above and below Bapaume, over all that old ground which was won first at frightful cost in the first battles of the Somme, lost again in the retreat of March this year, and won back in three weeks, without heavy losses considering all our gains in prisoners and ground, by the gallantry of men who had a big score to wipe out, a prestige to win back, and a spirit of certain victory. Nothing stopped them, though the enemy fought hard and had a machine-gun power amounting in some places to one gun to every four men. They did not stop, though they were nights and days without sleep, and tired in every muscle and nerve. They were not inspired with a passion of hatred for the enemy—that is not their mood—it was not vengeance that spurred them on; they had no blood-lust in their hearts whatever stay-at-home patriots may like to think. They had a rough good-humour with the prisoners they bustled back, and had a Bank Holiday mood of geniality to all men after a day of good success. But it was pride which was their goad, the pride of men who had suffered the humiliation of retreat and were now coming back, determined to come back, and not to be stopped

before they had put the enemy in his own place again. Each day of success cheered them on to another, and each division was in competition with the troops on the right and left, wanting to go one better, to take more prisoners, to set the pace. And the greatness of their success, the rapidity of this advance, the increasing demoralization of the enemy under this eager pressure, filled them with the highest hopes now that they had got the enemy on the run. This vision was in each man's eyes and heart, the splendid vision of such striking victories that there would no longer be the dreary vista of long years of war, but the end in sight at last. So they went on, these English battalions of ours who have had such rough days in four years' of war without much fame or notoriety, whose sacrifice has been enormous, who can hardly count the battles they have fought, and whose comrades lie buried beneath the little white crosses in that great graveyard of France which is our field of honour. I saw the pageant of the day, the grim pageantry of battle, on the day we broke the Drocourt-Quéant line, the strong switch of the Hindenburg line, which the German command had ordered to be held at all costs, but from which very early there came back thousands of prisoners, carrying their wounded and eager for escape from their own battle-line. The 2nd German Guards laughed and cheered when fresh batches of their comrades came down, and urged our men to go on fighting and take more of them, so that the war might end more quickly. Truly, it looked then as though the end might come more quickly than one had dared dream or hope.

Alas! it may not end quickly even now. In spite of all the prisoners we have taken since the beginning of our counter-stroke in August, in spite of the arrival of the American Army on the battlefields, and their brilliant success in the St.-Mihiel salient, where for the first time they fought a big battle of their own, and proved the quality which we all knew they had, these fine, fresh, keen, and modest men who have come with a young spirit into this

war-weary Europe to fight for ideals which are less confused than ours, clearer-cut, above old traditions, and old jealousies, and old hatreds; and, lastly, in spite of weakening German man-power and a growing despair of German peoples, there may still be a long period of most bloody fighting. The enemy will fight like a wounded tiger to protect his own frontiers, and by falling back under pressure to shorter lines will maintain a long and desperate defence. The machine-gun is a weapon very deadly in defence, and by falling back on to switch lines, and organizing villages, and making machine-gun emplacements in every bit of ruin, rear-guards may delay the progress of a superior enemy and make him pay heavy losses for advance. So if we force the enemy to fight to the last ditch the way is still long before he gets there, and peace is still at the end of a far vista of hope. But Germany is already defeated in all her ambitions and has the knowledge of the doom that is overtaking her philosophy of force, and it is by the steady courage and the immense sacrifice of our own troops, as well as those of our Allies, that this overthrow of Germany's menace to Europe has been assured.

PART I

THE BATTLES OF THE CAMBRAI SALIENT

I

The Surprise Attack

November 21, 1917

The enemy yesterday morning had a bitter surprise, when, without any warning by the ordinary preparations that are made before battle, without any sign of strength in men and guns behind our front, without a single shot fired before the attack, and with his wire—great belts of hideously strong wire—still intact, our stroops suddenly assaulted him at dawn, led forward by great numbers of tanks, smashed through his wire, passed beyond to his trenches, and penetrated in many places the main Hindenburg line and the Hindenburg support line beyond. Our attacking troops were the 51st (Highland) and 62nd Divisions of the 4th Corps, and the 6th, 12th, and 20th Divisions of the 3rd Corps, from north to south. The 29th Division passed through the 3rd Corps when the attack had developed, and the 56th (London) Division was in support of the 4th Corps. The 36th (Ulster) Division was on the extreme left, by the Canal du Nord, near Hermies.

It was a surprise to the enemy, and, to be frank, it will be a surprise to all our officers and men in other parts of the line, and to my mind it is the most sensational and dramatic episode of this year's fighting, ingeniously imagined and carried through with the greatest secrecy. Not a whisper of

it had reached men like myself, who are always up and down the lines, and since the secret of the Tanks themselves, who suddenly made their appearance in the Somme last year, this is, I believe, the best-kept secret of the war. The enemy knew nothing of it, although during the last twenty-four hours or so certain uneasy suspicions seems to have been aroused among his troops immediately in front of the attack. But his Higher Command did not dream of such a blow. How could the enemy guess in his wildest nightmare that a blow would be struck at him quite suddenly—at that Hindenburg line of his, enormously strong in wire, and redoubts, and tunnels, and trenches, and without any artillery preparation or any sign of gun-power behind our front? It is true that he had withdrawn many of his guns from this quiet part of the front, but until that wire of his was cut in the usual way by days of bombardment and after artillery registration which gives away all secrets, he had every right to believe himself safe—every right, though he was wrong. He did not know that during recent nights great numbers of Tanks were crawling along the roads towards Havrincourt and our lines below the Flesquières Ridge, hiding by day in the copses of this wooded and rolling country beyond Péronne and Bapaume. Indeed, he knew little of all that was going on before him under cover of darkness.

For our Generals and Staff Officers directing this operation there were hours of anxiety and suspense as the time drew near for the surprise attack. It was the most audacious adventure, and depended absolutely on surprise. Had the secret been kept? It looked as though the enemy suspected something a night or two ago, when he raided our trenches and captured two or three prisoners. Had those men told anything or had they kept the secret like brave men? All was on the hazard of that. It was probable that night sentries had heard the movement of traffic on these quiet, silent nights—the clatter of gunwheels over rough roads, the rumble of transport behind the lines. But his

wire was still uncut, and no new batteries revealed themselves, and that was the thing which might lull all his suspicions. To attack against uncut wire has always been death to the infantry, and every time till this it has been the guns' job. We know now that, whatever suspicions were aroused, the surprise was made yesterday morning. We caught the enemy "on the hop," as the men say, and in spite of uneasy moments in the night they had no proof of what was coming to them and no time to prepare against the blow. Some thousands of prisoners have been taken, and most of them say that the first thing they knew of the attack was when out of the mist they saw the tanks advancing upon them, smashing down their wire, crawling over their trenches and nosing forward with gun-fire and machine-gun fire slashing from their sides. The Germans were aghast and dazed. Many hid down in their dugouts and tunnels, and then surrendered. Only the steadiest and bravest of them rushed to the machine-guns and got them into action, and used their rifles to snipe our men. Out of the silence which had been behind our lines a great fire of guns came upon them. They knew they had been caught by an amazing stratagem, and they were full of terror. Behind the tanks, coming forward in platoons, the infantry swarmed, cheering and shouting, trudging through the thistles, while the tanks made a scythe of machine-gun fire in front of them, and thousands of shells came screaming over the Hindenburg lines. The German artillery made but a feeble answer. Their gun positions were being smothered by the fire of all our batteries, and there were not many German batteries, and the enemy's infantry could get no great help from them. They were caught. German officers knew that they had been caught, like their men, like rats in a trap. It was their black day.

I think all our men felt the drama of this adventure and had the thrill of it—a thrill which I believe had departed out of the war because of the ferocity of shell-fire and the staleness of war's mechanism and formula of attack. To

me it seemed the queerest thing to be on the roads again down south, where we followed the Germans up in their retreat in March of this year, and to pass over the Somme once more, to reach the first villages of the old war two years ago, and then the great track of that desolate, destroyed country where the enemy in his retreat blew up every village, cut down the trees, and laid waste to all the countryside. A few days ago I was looking at Passchendaele in the mist. Could it be real that yesterday morning at dawn I was passing through Péronne, with the first pale light of the sky upon its ruins, across the wooden bridges and into that square where the Royal Warwicks came first to look upon the German destruction of a fair little city? The houses were burning when I went in the first time. Only their ashes remained to-day, but it was stranger now after Passchendaele to come back for this other battle which had come so swiftly and so stealthily.

The battle had begun and our men had already gone away to the Hindenburg line when I went forward through the thistles—it was startling to see the absence of mud and shell-craters—and walked over to the village of Beaucamp and the front-line trenches from which our men were attacking. Just to the left of me was the brown earth of those newly dug assembly trenches—I think they must have been dug in the night—and a little beyond the white parapets of the Hindenburg line and beyond that again for a few hundred yards the villages of Ribecourt and Flesquières, towards which our men were fighting. Behind me were our field-batteries and heavies through which I had passed. They were not in hiding, but in full view of the astonished enemy, and firing an intense bombardment, so that the air was filled with the scream of the shells and with the frightful thumping of the fire, and one's ears were deafened. For miles the white mists of the early morning were thrust through with gun-flashes, and having left the Ypres salient where it seemed to me we had most of our guns, it was astounding to see so many batteries here.

From the ruins of Beaucamp I walked across to the Flesquières Ridge. To the left of me was the wood of Trescault, and higher up Havrincourt Wood and the château of Havrincourt, which is still standing, though in ruin, outside the village where there are roofless houses and upright walls, unlike the villages in the Flanders fighting, which have only a stone or two and a stick or two to mark their site. The battle picture was the most wonderful thing I had seen until then in this war—wonderful because very strange. War in South Africa, before intense bombardments as we know them had been invented, must have been like this. The country in our lines and the enemy's was rolling and green, unpitted by those great craters which make the Flemish battlefields. For miles it was dotted about with camps, horses, guns, gun-limbers, transport, and all the movement of an army in action. Numbers of Tanks were on the battlefield, resting a while for another advance —strange grey masses in the pale light of the morning, scarcely visible at any distance.

I spoke to one of the pilots.

"How are you doing?"

"We are giving them merry hell," he said; "it is our day out."

He was thoroughly pleased with himself, and only sorry that his tank was temporarily indisposed.

As I stood looking down on the battle, seeing only the gun-fire and nothing of the infantry in the thistles, though I was very close, I heard the awful sweep of machine-gun fire from the flanks of the Tanks. It was answered by machine-gun fire from enemy redoubts in Lateau Wood, where there was heavy fighting going on, and in Flesquières village on the height of the crest in front of where I stood by Beaucamp, and from the direction of Havrincourt. It was a very dreadful sound, in one steady blast of fire from many of those weapons—from hundreds of them—and broken into by the sharp staccato hammering, like a coffin maker with his tacks, from single machine-guns closer to

our captured ground. Hardly a shell-burst came from the enemy's side. I think I saw only a dozen big shells burst anywhere near our batteries, though the fire of shrapnel was greater over our lines of advance—greater, but with nothing like the intensity of the battle up north. It was clear at a glance that the enemy was weak in artillery. One of our battalions, the Royal Fusiliers, gained their objectives without a single casualty. Other battalions of English county regiments had very light losses, and they were mostly from machine-gun bullets. At the field dressing-station on the southern part of the attack they had only received 200 walking wounded by eleven o'clock in the morning—five hours or so after the battle began.

They were very few as battles go now, but I hated to see those poor fellows coming out of the fighting and making their way down in long, long trails to the dressing-station. Some of them could hardly hobble, and every few hundred yards had to sit down and lean up against the bank of a sunken road. Some of them were helped down by German prisoners, and it was queer to see one of our men with his arms round the necks of two Germans. German wounded, helped down by our men less hurt than they, walked in the same way, with their arms round the necks of our men, and sometimes an English soldier and a German soldier came along together very slowly, arm in arm, like old cronies. Most of the prisoners on my side of the battlefield were from the 20th Landwehr Division, which had relieved the 54th overnight. They were Brunswick men, and oldish fellows. Through the fields of thistles came single figures and little groups of wounded; and on the sides of some of the tracks were groups of prisoners with their guards, and on the ground badly wounded men on stretchers waiting for relays of stretcher-bearers or ambulances.

Some of the ambulance drivers were wonderful, and drove within a few hundred yards of the battle to pick up the fallen men. In spite of their pain and weariness, the wounded always had a cheery word to say. "How is it

going?" I asked, and man after man said: "Oh, it's splendid; we're doing grand; the boys are going straight on."

One man, a Cockney fellow wounded in the leg, kept a group of comrades halted for a rest on their way back in roars of laughter as he described his adventures of the morning, and how he was hit by a German sniper who suddenly appeared out of the trench. He used lurid language, but was so comical and honest a fellow that a *padre* standing near joined in the shouts of laughter that followed his monologue. This *padre* and others went very close to the lines with hot coffee and brandy in their flasks to meet the wounded and help them.

One of the wonders of the day was the work of our airmen. Just after dawn they came flying overhead so low that they seemed to make a breeze over my steel hat, so low that they waved hands to the infantry and shouted cheery words to them as they went through the enemy's lines. In the air the enemy was stone dead yesterday morning. He had been caught napping in the sky, as well as on the earth.

I am not allowed to give our exact gains to-day, and it is not well perhaps that the enemy should know them just now. But in a little while I hope to tell the whole story from start to finish, when it will, I hope, gladden people who have been sadly tried by bad news of late from other fronts. In strategy, it seems to me the battle may prove the best adventure we have had, and the enemy was utterly deceived.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT

In my earlier message, which was held back for military reasons of the soundest kind, I was able to give only the outline and the beginning of the most striking strategical blow we have ever inflicted on the enemy. Now, after more hours spent in the area of fighting at Ribecourt and the Flesquières Ridge, with a battle in progress to the left where the great Bois de Bolnon dominates the ground, I am able

to give more details about this dramatic adventure of our troops and there is no longer need of secrecy.

I have already told how we surprised the enemy by the stealthiness of our preparation, by the absence of all shell-fire from the batteries moved up to new positions in the darkness, and by the skilful distribution of all bodies of troops in well-chosen positions. What I was not able to tell earlier was that a mass of cavalry was also brought up and hidden very close to the enemy's lines, ready to make a sweeping drive should the Hindenburg line be pierced and broken by the advance of the tanks over the great belts of barbed wire and the deep wide trenches of the strongest lines on the Western Front. Yesterday I saw the cavalry in all this country waiting for their orders to saddle up and ride into the blue and take their first great chance. They belonged to the 5th and 1st Cavalry Divisions, with the 2nd Cavalry Division in support. I was astounded to see them there, and was stirred by a sharp thrill of excitement not without some tragic foreboding. Because, after seeing much of war on this front of ours, and coming straight from Flanders with its terrifying artillery and frightful barrages, it seemed to me incredible that, after all, the cavalry should ride out into the open and round up the enemy; and I had seen the Hindenburg line up by Bullecourt and Quéant, and knew the strength of it and the depth of the barbed-wire belts that surround it. The cavalry were in the highest spirits and full of a tense expectation. Young cavalry officers galloped past smiling and called out a cheery good-morning like men who have good sport ahead. In the folds of the land towards the German lines there were thousands of cavalry horses massed in parks, with the horse artillery limbered up and ready for their ride. All through yesterday morning infantry officers and men taking part in the advance asked the question, "When are the cavalry going through?" and then I heard the news, "The cavalry are through," and with all my heart and soul I wished them luck on the ride. This morning very early, in a steady rain and

wet mist, I saw squadrons of them going towards the fighting-line, and it was the most stirring sight I have seen for many a long day in this war, and one which I sometimes thought I should never live to see. They rode past me as I walked along a road through our newly captured ground, and across the Hindenburg line. They streamed by at a quick trot, and the noise of all the horses' hoofs was a strange rushing sound. The rain slashed down upon their steel hats, and all their capes were glistening, and the mud was flung up to the horses' flanks, and as, in long columns, they went up and down the rolling country and cantered up a steep track, making a wide curve round two great mine-craters in the roads which the enemy blew up in his retreat, it was a wonderful picture to see and remember. A small body of Canadian cavalry had already gone ahead, and had been fighting in open country since midday yesterday, after crossing the bridges at Masnières and Marcoing, which the enemy did not have time to destroy. They had done well. One section rode down a battery of German guns and captured them, and a patrol had ridden into Flesquières village when the Germans were still there, and others had swept round German machine-gun emplacements and German villages, and drawn many prisoners into their net.

For strange, unusual drama, far beyond the most fantastic imagination, this attack on the Hindenburg lines before Cambrai has never been approached on the Western Front, and the first act began when the Tanks moved forward, before the dawn, towards the long, wide belts of wire which they had to destroy before the rest could follow. These squadrons of Tanks were led into action by the general commanding their corps, who carried his flag on his own Tank—a most gallant man, full of enthusiasm for his monsters and their brave crews, and determined that this day should be theirs. To every officer and man of the Tanks he sent an order of the day before the battle, in most noble words, calling upon his men for their utmost devotion and service. They moved forward in small groups,

several hundreds of them, and rolled down the German wire and trampled down its lines, and then crossed the deep gulf of the Hindenburg main line, pitching nose downwards as they drew their long bodies over the parapets, and rearing up again with their long, forward reach of body, and heaving themselves on to the German parados beyond. The German troops knew nothing of the fate that menaced them until out of the gloom of the dawn they saw these great numbers of grey, inhuman creatures bearing down upon them, crushing down their wire, crossing their impregnable lines, firing fiercely from their flanks, and sweeping the trenches with machine-gun bullets.

A German officer whom I saw to-day, one out of thousands of prisoners who have been taken, described his own sensations. At first he could not believe his eyes. He seemed in some horrible nightmare and thought he had gone mad. After that, from his dug-out, he watched all the Tanks trampling about, and scrunching down the wire, and heaving themselves across his trenches and searching about for machine-gun emplacements, while his men ran about in terror trying to avoid the bursts of fire, and crying out in surrender.

"What could we do?" said this officer; and others, "We could do nothing—we were amazed by the mobility of the Tanks, by their dreadful power, and our men would not stand against them."

All the German officers express their admiration of the attack, both by the Tanks and the infantry, and of the strategical idea of it. "A brilliant attack," they say; and, after all, they know best as the victims of it.

NOVEMBER 21

ENGLISH troops of the 62nd, 6th, 20th, and 12th Divisions; Irish of the 36th (Ulster), and Scottish troops of the 51st (Highland) Division went behind the Tanks, in the great advance, cheering them on, laughing and cheering when they saw them get at the German wire and eat it up and then

head for the Hindenburg line and cross it as though it were but a narrow ditch. Some of the German troops kept their nerve and served their machine-guns, firing between the Tanks at the infantry, but the Tanks dealt with them and silenced them. Some of the German snipers fired at our men at a few yards, and the infantry dealt with them masterfully. But for the most part the enemy broke as soon as the Tanks were on them and fled or surrendered.

A few of the Tanks had bad luck, and I saw these cripples this morning where they were overturned by shell-fire or had become bogged. Elsewhere I saw one or two which had buried their noses deep into soft earth, and lay overturned or head downwards over deep banks down which they had tried to crawl. But the Tank casualties were light, and large numbers of them went ahead and fought all day up the Flesquières Ridge, and round the château of Havrincourt, where the enemy held out for some time, and across the bridges of Marcoing and Masnières, and up to the neighbourhood of Noyelles and Graincourt and beyond Ribecourt. Isolated battalions of German infantry belonging to the 20th Landwehr and the 54th and 9th Reserve Divisions attempted counter-attacks and fought bravely at Havrincourt Château and in Lateau Wood on the right, and in Flesquières village, where the Highland Territorials of the 51st Division were held up by fierce machine-gun fire yesterday afternoon. This defence of the village on the ridge was a serious impediment to our general advance, and a special attack was organized early this morning, which was carried out in a model way by Tanks and cavalry and skirmishers of the English and Scottish troops, and the infantry following in open order. The village was stormed this morning, and the ridge was cleared, as I found when I went up to Ribecourt, where still German snipers were concealed firing at our men passing along the road. All about Flesquières the fighting was fierce, and many gallant things were done by our men, and especially by the 2nd Durham Light Infantry, who charged seven German guns in action

which had been firing at point-blank range on our advancing Tanks. The Durhams captured the guns and killed the gunners. At Primy Chapel the 1st West Yorks did a similar exploit, and with great heroism charged and captured three 77's. Before five yesterday afternoon the crossings at Marcoing and Masnières and been secured, and our troops of the 29th Division were moving forward steadily, gathering in parties of prisoners and occupying the villages. In three at least of these villages they found numbers of French civilians, who came out rejoicing to meet their liberators. About 450 of these people were found in Masnières, and I am told that in another village there were more than a thousand. Many of them are now on their way back to safety behind our lines.

By half-past five English troops of the 29th Division who had been fighting heavily in Lateau Wood had cleared this position, and the snipers had been mopped up in Ribecourt by the 6th Division. The 4th Dragoon Guards had reached Nine Wood and Noyelles, where in the village the enemy fled at the approach of the Tanks. At half-past eight in the evening a counter-attack was reported upon English troops on the left, and then came the account of the charge of the Dragoon Guards against the guns near Noyelles, when they took forty prisoners and brought in the guns. Fighting ceased for most part of the night which closed in upon our infantry and cavalry and Tanks, but after this morning's dawn they were all on the move again, going forward still further into this strange open country where the grass grows and woods are living and French civilians are in villages which until yesterday morning were well behind the German lines and almost untouched by shell-fire.

On the left of this advance to-day there was heavy fighting, and when I was in that neighbourhood shortly after the earth had lightened for the day there was an incessant sweep of machine-gun fire, never ceasing for hours, as the Tanks engaged the enemy's machine-guns and redoubts, and the cavalry and infantry swept toward those positions. Behind

our lines our Army was on the move, and every man was working with new spirit and energy because of this movement, and was filled with enthusiasm because of our wonderful surprise to the enemy in his strongest lines. It was this effect of surprise which pleased our men most. "This is the sort of war we like," they said; "we have caught old Fritz bending." That surprise and the absence of high explosives from hostile artillery seemed to bring back for once the older style of war when it was a great though always a bloody adventure.

It was dead quiet in Ribecourt village, though snipers were round about it, I am told. When I drew near to it, I wondered to see such a place in the battlefields. It was not like the "villages" of the Somme and Flanders. It had real houses standing, real walls, real roofs, little red-brick houses and villas, old grey barns, and whitewashed farmsteads, gardens, and garden gates. It seemed quite untouched by war at a thousand yards, but when I went closer and into it, I saw that this was partly an illusion, and that there were shell-holes in the walls and in the roofs, and that some of the houses were gutted, and that it had been "unhealthy" enough under our guns, to drive the enemy's garrison underground into deep dug-outs and concreted tunnels. I went down into these places and saw how the enemy had left all his goods behind him in his flight, his machine-guns and ammunition, his revolvers and field-glasses now the property of English and Scottish soldiers, his picture postcards, and even, poor devil, his love letters. One dug-out I went into had been a machine-gun redoubt, very strong and well built, and arranged perfectly for comfort and defence. Nine prisoners were dragged out of this place, but somehow they had managed to destroy or hide their machine-guns, though not the accessories and ammunition of their weapons. I have no time to write more of what I saw to-day and yesterday—strange, unforgettable pictures of war in the open, but I would like to finish my message with a tribute to General Sir Julian Byng and all the officers under his com-

mand who devised and organized this bold adventure—real strategy of a most brilliant character—and kept it secret until the attack was launched by skilful plans. To General Sir Julian Byng, who commanded the Canadians before and after the capture of the Vimy Ridge before he succeeded General Allenby to the command of the Third Army, and to his Staffs of the Army and the corps, a great share in the honour of these days is due, as well as to those officers and the men who are now going through the rain and the mists in this new phase of open warfare.

II

Rescued Civilians

November 22

In the break made in the Hindenburg line our infantry, cavalry, and Tanks are still active, and there was heavy fighting this morning up near Bourlon Wood and the village of Fontaine-Notre-Dame, to the east of it, and not much more than two miles away from Cambrai. This village was entered yesterday afternoon by a combined operation of Tanks and cavalry, who captured a number of prisoners, and released over a hundred civilians. These people were overjoyed when our men had delivered them from the enemy, and to show their gratitude they set about making coffee for the officers and crews of the Tanks, surrounding the Tanks themselves and expressing their astonishment at these strange machines, of which they had heard only queer fantastic tales from German soldiers. This morning, when I went up to the Front, I met the first crowd of liberated people and felt as all of us do the same emotion which came to us in March of this year, when, after the German retreat east of Bapaume and Péronne, we met the civilians who, since the beginning of the war, had been in the hands of the enemy and under his rule. The people I saw to-day—gath-

ered together in a ruined village in the heart of all these new scenes of war, with a tide of cavalry streaming up the roads, with Tanks crawling on the hillsides and guns firing across the open fields, and new batches of German prisoners tramping down under escort, muddy, haggard, dazed by the swift turn of fortune's wheel, which had flung them into our hands when they seemed so safe behind their great lines—were all from Masnières, near to Marcoing, where 450 of them had awaited the coming of the English in feverish excitement as soon as they heard the approach of our advance-guards. They were pitiful groups of men, women, and children, pitiful because of their helplessness in this corner of the war, among the guns. Some of the women had babies with them, in perambulators and wooden boxes on wheels, into which, also, they had tucked a few things from their abandoned homes. Some of them were young women, neatly dressed, but all plastered with mud after their tramp across the battlefields, and woefully bedraggled. Some of the little girls had brought their dogs with them, and one child had a bird in a cage. There were sturdy peasants among them, and old, old folk, with wrinkled faces and frightened eyes because of this strange adventure in their old age, and young men of military age, who had not been taken away, like most of their comrades, for forced labour, because their work was useful to the enemy in their own district, as in the case of a good-looking young barber, to whom I talked, and who had shaved German officers and men for three years in Masnières. These people looked woebegone as they waited in the ruins for English lorries to take them away to safety, but in their hearts there was a great joy, as I found when I spoke to them, but they had a bitter hatred of the enemy because of the discipline put upon them, and their servitude, and most of all, and all in all, because he is the enemy of their country and the destroyer of their land and blood. They told me that after the coming of the Germans, in the early days of 1914, when the Uhlans entered Masnières and fought with French and

English cavalry at Crevecœurt where our cavalry was again fighting yesterday, they had no liberty and no property. The Germans requisitioned everything they had almost—their pigs and their poultry, and their grain and their wine. If a peasant hid a hen he was heavily fined or put in prison. If he was discovered with a bottle of wine he was fined ten francs or put in prison. In Mesnières there were some big, fine houses, like that of M. Millais, a rich manufacturer, full of good furniture and pictures. They were stripped and left bare. The very floors were taken up, and in all the little houses there was a search made for any bit of lead piping, for any bit of brass or metal. The civil population were fed almost entirely by the American Relief Committee, and after the entry of America into the war by the Spanish-Dutch Committee, which carried on the work. "Without that," they told me, "we should have starved." The men were all put to work for their enemy in fields or in the workshops, and women were made to sweep the roads, to wash the dirty linen of the German soldiers, to clean out rooms which were filled and refilled with vermin of the trenches. The commandants of the village were generally young lieutenants, very supercilious, very strict, but on the other hand not brutal or unjust. They were hard with the French people, as they were hard with their men.

The Mayor of Masnières, with whom I spoke to-day, said that there is no doubt, no shadow of doubt that the German people are suffering from the most severe privations, from real hunger so much that the officers often address the men on parade and in their lecture-rooms, and tell them that the courage of Germany is greater at the back than at the front, and that the soldiers must stand firm because they are suffering less than the people at home. Other men told me the same thing to-day. Among the civilians was a German soldier in the field-grey tunic, under civilian clothes, though a Frenchman of Lorraine like another German soldier with him, who was an Alsatian. According to the story of the Lorrainer he served in his own province during the

BRITISH LINE AFTER GERMAN COUNTER ATTACK IN THE CAMBRAI SALIENT, NOVEMBER, 1917

greater part of the war, and saw the extreme hunger of the people there. When he was sent to the Western Front he determined to escape, and saw his chance two days ago, when we broke down the Hindenburg line, and advanced upon Masnières. He hid himself among the civilians and disguised himself in civil clothes, and stayed in a barn until our men entered the village. The first news that came to these people of the change that was upon them was when they heard the firing of our guns on Tuesday morning, and later the sound of rifle shots and machine-gun fire. The German soldiers, about 340 of them, in Masnières, were thrown into a panic, many of them lost their heads utterly and ran about like doomed men. But others went down to the bridgehead, under the orders of their officers, and defended the machine-gun emplacements on the canal bank. The civilians could see English soldiers on the other side of the canal firing with rifles and machine-guns, and then at about eleven in the morning they saw what seemed to them strange beasts crawling forward to the bridge. They were the Tanks, and they came forward very steadily, and the leading Tank advanced on to the bridge, which broke down under its weight. As they did so the German soldiers broke, and many of them fled; but it was not until five minutes before the English entered the village that the last two German machine-gunners left the bridgehead, and retreated. For some time German riflemen sniped from houses and barns, and some English field-guns were still firing into Masnières. The French civilians were very frightened, and took refuge in their cellars, but they were buoyed up with the hope that their liberation was at hand, and then they rushed out to greet their liberators, weeping with joy. "For three years we lived in a nightmare," said the Mayor of Masnières to me this morning, "and now we seem to be in a dream too good to be true."

One man who has now come to our side of the line is a youngish man of thirty-eight or so, but with the look of one of sixty, and with a strange waxen colour like that of

death. He has a strange history. For all these three years and more, since the beginning of the war, he has lived in hiding in a cellar of his own house, where German officers were billeted. He was fed by his wife out of the extra ration given to a baby born during the war. The house was searched once a week, according to rule, and both husband and wife would have been punished by death if the man had been discovered, but he was never found, and, by a queer chance, the morning that the English came to Masnières was the day on which the house was to be searched again. The man, who is now free, has wept ever since his liberation from that dark cellar in the town.

III

The Tunnel Trench to Bourlon Wood

November 23

The first great surprise of our attack across the Hindenburg lines is over, and the free open fighting, when the cavalry, Tanks, and infantry rounded up the enemy in French villages, has now been followed by closer fighting of the old style, with attacks and counter-attacks, ground gained and ground lost on both sides, while the enemy is making a strong stand with local forces and units hurriedly brought up in order to gain time for the arrival of stronger reinforcements. He is massing men and guns in Cambrai, and preparing to hold a line of defence round that city if he is forced still further back from his present positions. The battle has continued to-day, and our troops and Tanks have been engaged in heavy fighting round Bourlon Wood, and at Fontaine-Notre-Dame, to the east of it, which we lost yesterday for a time, after a sharp counter-attack upon our Seaforth Highlanders, who entered it on Wednesday night with the Tanks. It is a tragedy for the poor civilians there that after a brief spell of liberty which they used to

provide the Tank crews with coffee, some of them, if not all of them, fell again into the hands of the enemy.

To-day we are attacking the village of Mœuvres, just southwest of Fontaine-Notre-Dame, which was also taken and lost after the great advance of the Ulstermen on the morning of the 21st. That attack of the Ulster battalions on the first two days of the battle was a hard and grim episode of the general action, and the ground was gained only by most persistent endeavours and courage. These men newly down from the battles of Flanders, where they had had terrible and tragic fighting, were determined to go far in this new field, and their spirit was high. They had no Tanks to cut the wire in front of them, as those machines were concentrated in large numbers on the right wing of the attack. The Ulstermen had the Hindenburg trenches before them, wide belts of wire, and on the other side of the trenches the deep ditch of the Canal du Nord, a most formidable series of defences. They had to break down the wire in front of them by bomb explosions and under heavy machine-gun fire from the trenches and the farther side of the canal bank, where the Germans were in their concrete blockhouses and strong emplacements. At first they broke a way through all the obstacles, in spite of being hung up by the wire here and there, and the harassing fire of snipers, and they cleared the trenches of men who were demoralized by the surprise and suddenness of the attack. Later some of the Ulstermen came up against a high "spoil" bank, or waste heap, sixty feet high from the canal bank, and defended from tunnelled dug-outs underneath. It was at about 8.30 in the morning that they captured the "spoil heap," and a crowd of prisoners in the dug-outs, and then tried to get astride the Cambrai road, and to cross the canal.

A gallant little body of Belfast men, all from the shipbuilding works on Queen's Island, worked for hours under fire to build a bridge across and to repair a destroyed causeway, so that the infantry could pass. This was done before dusk, and the Ulstermen seized the way across the Cam-

brai road, but could not cross the canal or get forward very far owing to the fierce machine-gun fire that swept down upon them from the east side of the canal, where the enemy was holding Mœuvres and Graincourt. It was on Wednesday morning that the Inniskillings bombed their way into Mœuvres, and fought their way into the centre of the village, where a barricade had been put up against them. In the afternoon the enemy organized a counter-attack from one of the lochs on the Canal du Nord, but it did not drive back the Ulstermen; and it was not until yesterday morning, when our men had almost exhausted their ammunition and were spent after their long hours of fighting, that the enemy was able to drive a small wedge into our line.

By this time most of Mœuvres was in our hands, but the enemy was able to get up strong bodies of grenadiers and riflemen, and before darkness came the Ulstermen withdrew to the southern edge of the village. All this time the West Riding troops of the 62nd Division had been advancing and fighting steadily up to the Cambrai road, and over a depth of seven thousand yards of ground—a record advance in one day—up to Graincourt.

Tanks and cavalry co-operated in this attack, and the Tanks were a most powerful aid, and cruised round and through the village, where they put out nests of machine-guns. The cavalry then went on into Anneux; but the first patrol had to retire because of the fierce machine-gun fire that swept down the streets, and it had to be attacked and taken again the day before yesterday. Below Graincourt Church the Yorkshiremen of the 62nd Division found some great catacombs elaborately fitted up as battalion headquarters, and supplied with electric light by the attentions of two German electricians, who remained for some time in our employ after their capture. In Anneux we captured two 8-inch howitzers, and in the neighbourhood a battery of 5.9's. The garrison of these two villages belonged mostly to the 107th Division, lately from Russia, sent up in sup-

port of the 20th Landwehr, who are elderly fellows, and not great fighters; but the West Riding troops captured prisoners from six German divisions on their march forward. On the 21st they pushed up to the north-west of Bourlon Wood, and saw nothing of the enemy, in spite of the machine-gun fire that poured down the glade. They saw nothing of him until they were surprised to see faces coming up from the ground not far away from them. They were the faces of German soldiers looking over a concrete trench artfully camouflaged with green canvas along the edge of the wood. A German aeroplane, one of the rare birds of this battle from the enemy's side, came over, flew low and shot at the Yorkshiremen with machine-gun fire; and, with the rifle-fire ahead of them, the position was too bad to hold with their strength at the time, and they withdrew a little until yesterday, when they attacked again behind a line of Tanks, routing out a number of machine-guns in the southern end of the wood.

This wood was held by the 214th German Division, who suffered heavily. Altogether the West Riding men took over 1000 prisoners and killed many of the enemy, so that they put out of action a number far in excess of their own losses.

I have already told how the Highlanders, south of the Yorkshiremen, captured the Flesquières Ridge and fought very hard for Flesquières village, which held out all the first day. On the 21st, after that battle, the "Jocks" pushed on to the village of Cantaing, where they found about 170 civilians, who received them with wild enthusiasm, so that the Highlanders, all muddy and wet, were kissed by old peasant women and young girls and by children held up to them. These people were weeping and laughing at the same time, and for a little while seemed beside themselves with joy. Yesterday they came trapesing down the roads, as I saw those of Masnières, with their perambulators and push-carts, with old grandmothers and little babies, all bedraggled and mud splashed, soaked to the skin, in heavy rain, but

happy and with shining eyes because of that great strange gift of liberty which had come to them again.

While the main attack was happening opposite the defence lines of Cambrai a very remarkable battle was being fought by Irish battalions of the South and West, belonging to the 16th Division, along the Hindenburg line to the west of Bullecourt, and by English troops along a curved trench beyond Bullecourt itself. The great tunnel trench of this sector of the Hindenburg line had been attacked before in the summer of this year without success, and the enemy was very strong then in his 2000 yards of tunnel which, as we knew, was elaborately mined and charged, so that it could be blown up if ever our men broke into it. For many weeks past our field-guns had been cutting the wire and distressing the enemy by putting up smoke barrages and sending over gas clouds. He was kept in constant fear of attack, but never knew when it would happen to him. He held it in great numbers, and 1000 men massed in the tunnel and 1000 yards of support trench which he had begun to dig behind—an unusual strength for this length of front.

On the morning of the battle, smoke-candles were lit all along the line, and to the left and right of the Irish other demonstrations were made. Then the Irish went away, all very keen and confident, and glad to fight in this country, and with this chance of surprise, rather than in Flanders, where they had had such a hard time. Some expert tunnelling officers and miners were among the first to go into the Hindenburg tunnel trench in order to cut the leads and prevent the blowing up of the mines. It was a great peril and a frightful anxiety, on which the lives of many men were at stake. But luck was with the Irish that morning. A happy discovery made at the most fortunate moment showed all the workings of the mine. In the support trench some of the enemy fought hard, and even in the short distance which the Irish had to go, a few hundred yards at most, they were caught by machine-gun fire and did not escape altogether lightly so; but the enemy's losses were

very heavy. Apart from the prisoners, who numbered nearly 700, 350 have been counted on the ground, which is now ours, and in counter-attacks by local bodies of men he lost many more.

There were nine of these counter-attacks against the Irish—attacks by platoons and companies, and some of them were utterly destroyed. The assault by the English troops on Bovis trench north of Bullecourt by the West Yorks and the Northumberland Fusiliers of the 3rd Division was also successful and inflicted severe losses. The enemy in his bulletins says that on this part of the Front we were unable to advance beyond the third line of trenches. The Irish were never meant to go further at the moment than they did; but this taking of the tunnel trench was a sensational exploit, and of good military value to us. To the enemy it is a heavy blow. The 240th German Division were the troops who suffered so much from the Irish attack, and they were strong fellows, although pale after their long life in the darkness of their tunnel where they were caught like rats.

NOVEMBER 22

AFTER our smash through the Hindenburg lines on Tuesday morning, and as soon as the German Command could get any news as to what had happened, reinforcements were hurried up by omnibuses from camps near Cambrai, but they were so hard pressed that they actually cleared out a camp of cripples and convalescents at Beaurevoir, and hurled them into the fighting-lines. It was a brutal and stupid assault. The men were too ill to fight, and now are too ill to stand. This morning one of them, who lay about among the prisoners, was found to be in the last stages of consumption, and had to be taken by us to an isolation hospital. Among other troops and oddments of troops hurried up to stop the gap was at least one battalion of the First Guards Reserve sent down from Lens.

There is no doubt that the enemy is now rushing up all available troops to make a stand round Cambrai. To be fair

to his men—and to ours, because it was not a walk-over for them after the first surprise—the troops holding the woods and villages behind the Hindenburg line have fought hard and well, and have tried to beat our men back and hold them off by many counter-attacks. They defended themselves stubbornly against our 29th Division in Lateau Wood, as I have already told, and at a place called Les Rues Vertes, in the neighbourhood of Masnières. Marcoing was entered by Worcesters, Newfoundlanders, and others without great opposition, but there was severe fighting beyond that village and in Neuf Wood on the left, which was attacked at the bayonet point and taken after heavy "scrapping," as our men call it, by the Guernsey Light Infantry, who were in action for the first time.

A heavy counter-attack developed from the north-east of Masnières at about eleven o'clock of the first morning of the battle. The German infantry advanced in massed formation, shoulder to shoulder, as in the old days of 1914, and as I saw them at Falfemont Farm on the Somme, and they were mown down by our gun-fire. Another attack of the same kind was attempted after midday from the Marcoing side, but the men dropped into the trenches on their way and never came out again. Another attack, repeated yesterday, was made upon the village of Noyelles after its capture by English battalions, and one post held by Lancashire Fusiliers changed hands seven times. The village itself changed hands three times, and there was fierce street fighting, and the place had to be gained and regained from house to house and from cellar to cellar, the enemy defending every wall by machine-gun and rifle-fire, and sniping our men from the roofs and trees. The enemy was driven across the canal by men of the 16th Middlesex Regiment and the 2nd Royal Fusiliers.

There was very lively skirmishing about Crèvecœur, and here a little body of the Northumberland Yeomanry came up against some German guns in action. They were about to charge when they saw that there was a belt of uncut wire

between them and the enemy's battery. It was impossible to lead horses against that, so they dismounted, worked round the wire, and captured the guns. It was cavalry also, with the aid of Tanks, which captured the village of Cantaing at six o'clock last evening, with another bag of prisoners whom I saw marching down the roads to-day.

I wrote yesterday of German officers who spoke with admiration of our attack, and praised the courage of our men and the strategy which has led to our victory. They are not all like that, and some of the younger officers are filled with fury, and show it by their words and gestures when they see such swarms of their own men marching by under the escort of a few mounted guards, and when they see our cavalry riding through villages which until two days ago were behind their lines. After all, it is an incredible blow to these men behind the Hindenburg line, who believed themselves impregnable and had no warning of their impending fate. The civilians with whom I talked told me that the German officers have been much elated lately over the retreat of the Italians, and boasted of marching to Paris in the same way. Their men are not so buoyed up. All they want is to get the war over and done with. "After each of their successes," said the Mayor of Masnières, "they show a brief enthusiasm and then relapse into the despondency which is their usual mood. They believed in the summer that the war would be over by Christmas. 'We shall all be home for Christmas,' they said. But they cannot give any reason for this faith, and the most intelligent are the most hopeless."

There was heavy fighting to-day round Bourlon Wood, with steady artillery-fire from our guns, and our cavalry and Tanks and splendid infantry are rounding up more of the enemy in his villages and rearguard posts. Meanwhile, the enemy is bringing up his guns and new men, but whatever happens now the surprise blow has been struck, thousands of prisoners have been taken, and the heroic adventure of

the Tanks has shown that an attack can be made secretly and suddenly, so that strategy comes back to the Western Front.

IV

The Battles of Bourlon Wood

November 25

For two days there has been a fierce battle for possession of Bourlon Wood, the high forest which commands all the country north of and north-east of the villages of Inchy and Mœuvres to west of it, and for Fontaine-Notre-Dame and La Folie Wood to east of it.

In all this fighting London battalions of the 56th Division on the left, across the first and second trenches of the great Hindenburg line up by the Louverval-Inchy road, Yorkshire troops of the 62nd Division, and other English battalions of the 40th Division, in the centre of the direct attack on the forest of Bourlon, and Highlanders of the 51st Division on the right working eastwards of Bourlon Wood and up to Fontaine-Notre-Dame, which they gained and lost in fierce attacks and counter-attacks, have shown a most dauntless determination to make good the triumph of the first day, when they broke the German line. Some of these men have been fighting now for nearly a week. They have had no rest and no sleep, except what they snatched in odd half-hours lying out in the open beyond all trench-lines or in the ruins of the villages out of which they have routed the enemy. They have gone on short rations, as they are out in the blue far from supply-dumps, and after the first surprise on Tuesday morning, when they caught in their net of steel a mass of dazed and frightened men, they have had to force their way forward, or hold the positions they have gained against great numbers of counter-attacks from German troops hurled up to Cambrai from all available sources, and against small garrisons and bodies of storm troops and

patrols and snipers, whose spirit has been rallied by their officers, and who have fought with really desperate courage to stop the gap made in their lines.

The break through of Tuesday morning has been followed by a ding-dong struggle along twelve miles or more of open country from Proville to the east and south of Masnières, but it is a battle unlike anything we have seen since the early days of the war. It is open fighting again, away for the most part from trench systems except on the left, where some Royal Fusiliers (Londoners they were) were extending their hold on further stretches of the Hindenburg line; open fighting in a wide sweep of undulating country, where there is grass instead of shell-pits and blasted earth. It was essential for all further progress to gain that black forest which covers 600 acres of the high ground to the west of Cambrai. The difficulty of capturing it was increased by the loss of Fontaine-Notre-Dame on the eastern side, and by the strong defence of fresh German troops round Mœuvres and Inchy on the west. Our cavalry had not been able to make a sweeping movement, though they had fought many gallant little actions about these fortified villages, and rounded up many prisoners. The enemy had been quick in rushing up guns. The weakness of his artillery on the first day, due partly to the wonderful counter-battery work of our splendid gunners, to the capture of over 100 guns on the first two days of the battle, and to the concentration of the enemy's artillery in Flanders, is no longer a factor in our favour. The German High Command has ordered up every available battery from other positions, and behind the German lines the roads must have been choked day and night by guns and limbers on the march to the country round Cambrai, straining every nerve of horse and man to get to their new sectors in time to remedy their disaster. They have come up now, and yesterday I saw some very deadly barrage-fire below Inchy and Mœuvres and south of Bourlon Wood as proof of their arrival.

"They have been damn quick into getting on to the

ground," said some of our own gunners, and they spoke with a queer kind of admiration, as good sportsmen, of the rapidity with which the German gunners had registered and got into action.

So it was not against a weak enemy and no longer with the first gift of surprise that our men attacked Bourlon

THE HEIGHTS OF BOURLON WOOD

Wood yesterday and the day before, and carried their battle-line forward below Inchy and Mœuvres and made a new assault upon the village of Fontaine-Notre-Dame, where the Highlanders had fought forwards and backwards through the streets now burning with a fierce red glow, though many houses still gave cover to machine-gunners and snipers and German infantry.

On Friday morning the battle opened on all sides of the forest of Bourlon—south, west, and east. It was an attack in which all arms worked together in the most spectacular and splendid union. Our guns opened a terrific drumfire, and it was the strongest demonstration so far in this battle of all those batteries which had been hidden before, the sudden surprise of all those field-guns which, after the first advance, had galloped far forward over the captured ground, and taken up new positions astoundingly close to the enemy's line of retreat, all those heavy and light batteries which I had seen streaming up through the day

and night, choking the roads with their long columns, silhouetted against the pale dawn as they wound over the hillsides, surging in wild turmoil of horse and mules and guns and wagons in the ruined villages behind the lines, and getting into action a few minutes after their journey's end. Many of the men had fought on other battlefields in this year of terrible fighting. For months they had had but little rest and no kind of peace, and had lived in shell-fire until they were haggard and worn and weary. But now they came to these new battlefields with as much enthusiasm as though they were going into action for the first time, because of the new promise of victory, and they did not spare an ounce of their strength, and went to almost superhuman exertions to get up their guns and their shells. They were first to start the Battle of Bourlon Wood.

But the first to advance were the Tanks—more than two score of them, with single scouts ahead, followed by others in echelon formation. Many of them had already been fighting since Tuesday morning; all of them had been working day and night for many days before that. Standing on the battlefield yesterday with one of them going to join his brothers who were round Bourlon Wood I heard from the young pilot the tale of his adventure in this battle, and all through his tale ran one refrain. It was his need of sleep. He spoke the word sleep as though it were some spell word holding all the beauty of life. For nine days and nights before the surprise at dawn he had been working to get his engine right, to get his guns right, to fix things up, as he said, speaking with a grim, worn look at the box of tricks by his side. Half an hour before he went over he was seen by the enemy in Havrincourt Château away on the hill in front of him by the white glare of their Verylights. He had tried to stop every time a light went up, but they saw his movement, and instantly a field-gun opened on him. Its shooting was marvellous, and I saw how near the shells had fallen to the track of that Tank, only a yard or two away. The young pilot was sitting outside his Tank with

his sergeant, but presently he said, "I guess we'll get inside. This is getting too hot." And inside, as they advanced to battle, the pilot and the sergeant and one other man were the only ones awake. All the rest were fast asleep, dead and drugged by sleep after their long ordeal. That seems to me the queerest thing I have heard in this battle, that and the experience of one Tank which was hit twice by direct hits. The first shell burst inside the Tank after passing between the arm and the body of the pilot, and by an amazing chance did not wound a man. Another shell came inside, and again no one was hit. Later the officer and the crew got out to deal with their Tank, which had become stuck between two banks up by Havrincourt village, when the enemy was still fighting there. Machine-gun bullets whipped round them like a swarm of wasps, but only one man was hit and only slightly touched. "It was a million to one chance each time," said the pilot, "three sets of miracles which you can't count on again."

When the Tanks advanced on Bourlon Wood they were driven and fought by men who had been shaken and bruised and banged inside those narrow forts, who had been drenched by sweat in great heat, who needed sleep with a drunken craving, who were in continuous peril of death, but who goaded themselves with a spiritual spur in order to do their job well and add to the honour of the Tanks. So they moved steadily towards the enemy and his guns, inside their queer, beast-like things, which look very sinister as they go forward in the grey light of dawn, as I have seen them. Little bodies of cavalry were riding on their flanks of attack, and the infantry came behind in open order—those Highlanders of the 51st and Yorkshiremen of the 62nd Divisions and other English and Welsh battalions who had been fighting in this open battle since Monday night. Tanks and infantry gained and held the sunken road south-west of Bourlon Wood, and a number of Tanks were seen advancing steadily in a north-west direction from the village of Graincourt. Another Tank was going well 500 yards

south of Fontaine-Notre-Dame, and by Anneux there was still another group, in echelon formation, advancing northwards to get on the east side of the forest and drive a wedge between that and Fontaine-Notre-Dame. The enemy's guns answered the rockets which went up from the German troops, each light like a high wail for help, and laid down a heavy barrage of high explosives and shrapnel south of the forest and all along the line of our attack.

NOVEMBER 26

AFTER heavy counter-attacks, following the fighting round Bourlon Wood, which I described in my last message, the enemy succeeded in entering Bourlon village again yesterday morning, and seems to have held his ground there up to the present hour. This morning the battle was renewed, and our troops of the 40th Division—Royal Welsh Fusiliers, the Welsh Regiment, South Wales Borderers, Lancashire, Surrey, and Suffolk men, with Highland Light Infantry and Argyll and Sutherlands—are heavily engaged not only on the outskirts of Bourlon village, but also in the neighbourhood of Fontaine-Notre-Dame, east of the forest, which, as I have previously told, is partially destroyed by fire, after having changed hands more than once.

The enemy has brought up strong reinforcements, and is now well provided with artillery, which has been sent up with great rapidity from other sections of his front, and when I was in the neighbourhood of Havrincourt this morning there was a violent bombardment in progress on both sides. There is no doubt in my mind that the German command will make powerful attempts to regain Bourlon Wood and the country about it in order to relieve the command we now have over his Cambrai line, which is one of his main lines of supply, so that if we make the railway untenable he is very seriously menaced in his communications. One effect of the battle is already evident further north, where his troops have been compelled to abandon small parts of their trench system on both sides of Bulle-

court after the capture of the Hindenburg tunnel trench by the Irish brigades and trenches behind Bullecourt by the West Yorks and Northumberland Fusiliers of the 3rd Division.

The capture of Bourlon Wood and the resistance by our troops against formidable counter-attacks all through Friday and Saturday was aided by the fine gallantry of the cavalry—some of our Hussars—who fought dismounted in co-operation with infantry and Tanks. It was due to them that the north-east corner of the wood was held when seriously menaced by repeated attack, and if this had been lost the whole of the wood might have been in jeopardy. After the break through on the first morning of the battle the cavalry have had a hard time without much luck. Their own hopes of a big drive were spoilt by several unfortunate incidents. One of these incidents was the defence of Flesquières village by a garrison of Germans who put up a long struggle before yielding to our pressure, and so held a wedge in our line which made it dangerous for cavalry to sweep round on either side. Another unlucky thing was the breaking of the bridge over the canal at Masnières by the weight of a Tank, which was first to cross. One squadron of Canadian cavalry—the Fort Garry Horse—succeeded in repairing the broken bridge over the canal by the aid of the civilians from Masnières, who came out to meet them, and at about half-past three crossed under machine-gun and rifle-fire from the banks with only half a dozen casualties. They only numbered 123 men, and orders had been sent after them to retire, as it was so late in the day, but their colonel lamed his horse in a sunken road, and the order did not reach the squadron commander in time. So they rode on, and had some remarkable adventures. They moved north, and made their way through the gap in the wire cut by the troopers, where they were again under rifle-fire and machine-gun fire which wounded the captain and two men. The command was carried on by a young lieutenant, who rode with his men until they reached a camou-

flaged road south-east of the village of Rumilly, where they went through in sections under the fire of the enemy hidden on the banks. Here they came up against a battery of field-guns, one of which fired point-blank at them. They charged the battery, putting the guns out of action and killing some of the gunners. Those who were not destroyed surrendered, and the prisoners were left to be sent back by the supports.

The squadron then dealt with the German infantry in the neighbourhood, some of whom fled, while some were killed or surrendered. All this operation was done at a gallop, under fire from flanking blockhouses. The squadron then slowed down to walk, and took up a position in a sunken road one kilometre east of Rumilly. Darkness crept down upon them, and gradually they were surrounded by German infantry with machine-guns, so that they were in great danger of capture or destruction. Only five of their horses remained unhit, and the lieutenant in command decided that they must endeavour to cut their way through and get back. The horses were stampeded in the direction of the enemy in order to draw the machine-gun fire, and while these riderless horses galloped wildly out of one end of Sunken Road the officer and his surviving troopers escaped from the other end. On the way back they encountered four bodies of the enemy, whom they attacked and routed.

On one occasion their escape was due to the cunning of another young lieutenant who spoke German and held conversation with the enemy in the darkness, deceiving them as to the identity of his force until they were able to take the German troops by surprise and hack a way through. This lieutenant was hit through the face by a bullet, and when he arrived back in Masnières with his men in advance of the rear-guard he was only able to make his report before falling in a state of collapse.

It was another small body of cavalry—the 7th Dragoon Guards—that took the village of Noyelles. After skirting round it under rifle- and machine-gun fire they put their horses to the gallop and rode straight through the main

street at three o'clock in the afternoon. In the village they captured twenty-five prisoners, ten of whom were hiding in cellars, and handed them to the infantry who followed. Afterwards they went on through a little copse south of La Folie Wood, where they killed some of the enemy and scattered some machine-gunners. Further along they met seven German officers walking about in the wood as though there was no war on, and took them prisoners, though they had to release some of them later as they could not be bothered with them. Later they came across six ammunition-wagons in La Folie Wood, and destroyed them. In the heart of the wood was a German divisional headquarters, and one of our cavalry officers approached the cottage stealthily and fired his revolver through the window. The troops then made their way back, and after riding through another party of German soldiers came into Noyelles again. On the following day another squadron of the 4th Dragoon Guards took the village of Cantaing at the gallop, one party direct and two others riding round on each flank. They captured fifty prisoners in the streets, and patrols went up to Fontaine-Notre-Dame, but could not get in as it was then heavily defended. Other squadrons, including the 15th Hussars, were riding out in the open country, coming up against machine-gun fire and rifle-fire, capturing small bodies of prisoners and rendering great aid to the infantry before they were used as a dismounted force in the attack on Bourlon Wood and in the resistance of counter-attacks.

NOVEMBER 25

IT was early in the morning that I went out again over the newly captured ground to see this battle. Every yard of it across the Hindenburg lines—those deep, wide trenches now empty of all life—was strewn with evidences of the enemy's panic-stricken flight and capture in the beginning of the battle.

The way up to Havrincourt village, on the ridge to the west of Flesquières—first in the dip by an old stone cross

five centuries old, dedicated to St. Hubert, patron saint of huntsmen before our Tanks went a-hunting on a fine November morning, and then up the slope where the Yorkshires had to fight their way to the strong high wall of red brick surrounding the château grounds—was littered with things the enemy had left behind him—his field-grey overcoats, his shrapnel helmets, innumerable pairs of boots, his goatskin pouches, his rifles, bayonets, bandoliers, tunics, and gas-masks. It was as though large numbers of men had thrown everything away from them in moments of cold terror and had fled naked from their fear. In their dug-outs were all the little comforts of life which men gather to make life endurable in such dark holes, with wooden chairs and tables from French houses, and mirrors and water-jugs and other furniture. Those who had been the masters of these houses had gone away, and others had entered into possession—our own men, the "moppers up," who now, while the battle was flaming over the countryside not many thousands of yards away, were settling down and searching for souvenirs in these new quarters.

I followed the track of the Tanks, and went through wide gaps they had made in the barbed wire—acres of barbed wire—and went along the route of the Scottish when they surged after the Tanks on that great morning of surprise. Some of them had left their kilts behind, caught on barbed wire, and with no time to mind rents in the tartan of the Seaforths, they had gone on in their steel hats and very little else. And all this way to the battle was littered with letters in German and English, as though there had been a paper-chase instead of the hunting of men. They were the intimate letters which men wear close to their hearts until war snatches them away and tosses them to the breeze. "Mein lieber bruder," I read, as I picked up one of them, and "My darling hubby," began a letter to a London boy, who was now away by Bourlon Wood.

I went out into open country, and outstretched before me was the whole panorama of this battle. I went up to the

edge of it, as close as one could go without getting into the furnace fires, and all around me was the swirl and turmoil of the battlefield. Everywhere Tanks were crawling over the ground, some of them moving forward into action, some of them out of action, mortally wounded, some of them like battle-cruisers of the land, going forward in reconnaissance. Across the field guns were moving up, and drivers of gun-limbers were urging their horses forward over the muddy slopes with new supplies of ammunition for the forward batteries. Small bodies of cavalry rode about and put their horses to the gallop when black shrapnel burst overhead with a high snarling menace. Gunner officers and observers were out in the open watching the enemy's fire, and their own signallers were flag-wagging as though in Battersea Park on a Saturday morning in the old days of peace, though the hostile shell-fire was creeping near them and odd shells were scattered over the countryside searching for the likes of them, as they would say. It was a fantastic and unimaginable scene, and the battlefield conversation would be unbelievable if I were to put down all the remarks I heard from officers and men about me on the edge of the battle and within the zone of fire.

Less than 2000 yards away from us was a town on fire. It was Graincourt, and the enemy was "knocking hell out of it" in revenge for its capture. It had been my intention to go there, but I stopped short of it, and was glad I had gone no farther. Shell after shell burst among its roofs and walls without ceasing for several hours. Red brick cottages went up in clouds of rosy smoke with a flame in the heart of it. The enemy's shells burst in Graincourt with many colours—green and purple and orange and rose pink—so that it was a wonderful poem in colour, but as tragic as the death that was there. On the slope of the ground above this village, not so far away that at any moment the slope itself might not be swept with high explosives, three English soldiers watched the battle while

they sat at their ease on a garden-seat taken from a neighbouring park. Nearby, two officers, sitting on an upturned tub and a petrol tin, were munching sandwiches and watching the progress of our attack on Bourlon Wood, which stood up in front of us black and big, with the sun on its southern edge, while our men were fighting inside with the Tanks, and where the enemy was flinging down a heavy barrage.

Officers came galloping up and leaned down over their saddles and asked, "Have you got any news how things are going; how about Bourlon village and Mœuvres and Inchy?"

"I don't like those five point nines," said a little Tank officer who was standing by the side of his monster. He pointed to a road upon which large numbers of shells were bursting, and said, "That's where I have got to go; I think I'll have lunch first." He began to munch some bread and cheese, and with only half an eye on the battle told me how he had got a bottle of whisky out of a Divisional Headquarters in return for a ride in his Tank to an excellent major, and how jolly glad he was of the prize, because "you couldn't get a drink for love or money on this side of the battlefields."

"Do you know where my battalion is?" asked a lonely Guards' officer, coming up. He had just come back from leave, and was hunting for his men somewhere on the south side of Bourlon Wood. Overhead come the flying men, perilously low, as usual. They went fluttering over the German lines, and we were glad when they flew a little further off as the enemy flung back shrapnel at them which might hit us if it didn't hit them. A column of cavalry came down a sunken road and then out on to the skyline above one of the Tanks. "They will be drawing fire on me next," said the Tank pilot, and with that desire of life which is strong in man, everybody hoped he was in a safer place than the other fellow. At 2.30, or a little later, the enemy began to fire intensely along the whole line of our

front below Mœuvres and Inchy. "Another counter-attack, curse them," said an officer; "that is about the seventh to-day." The German gunners were putting down their barrage line dead straight for miles, and revealed an abominable new strength in artillery. The barrage lines swept forward, with white smoke clouds rising after the flash of bursting shells from field-guns and big, black, sinister clouds with a vomit of earth in them where the German heavies were crashing, but it was not a counter-attack. It was a barrage laid down to kill our own attack on the two villages to the west of Bourlon Wood which was very quiet and still because no gunners were shooting into it while men were fighting at close quarters within those glades. Light signals went up from the enemy's lines. Our infantry was advancing again. Though I could not see, I am sure the moment of the new attack came when our batteries, which had not been shooting very hard for some time, and with only irregular rounds from isolated guns, suddenly burst out into a wild roar of drum-fire. All our field-batteries were revealed by their flashes for miles along the Front, and there were many of them, and they were very close to the enemy. I stood in the centre of their arc, with the heavier guns behind me, and the air seemed to rock and sway with the rhythm of their fire. Below the slopes the grass was alive with little rushlights, and as afternoon became darkened, and dusk crept over the battlefields, and the shadows lengthened and deepened round Bourlon Wood, these gun-flashes became more vivid.

There were five heavy counter-attacks on our line yesterday afternoon, and by four o'clock the enemy was still in Bourlon village, and with a last strong and desperate effort succeeded in driving us partly back in the forest again off the high ground at the northern end. It was the only success he had had in the day, though he had held our London men of the 56th Division back from ground round Inchy and half-way through Mœuvres village, to which he had been driven.

He could not hold the high ground in Bourlon Wood. As the sun was setting on this day of battle, with a glorious bar of shining gold below the clouds, a final attack was made by our men, infantry and cavalry working together, and the enemy was again routed from the greater part of the wood, and our troops entered the village of Bourlon itself, fought through streets hotly defended by rifle and machine-gun fire and mopped up most of the main defences, although odd groups of men are still fighting there.

When I went away yesterday evening there was still heavy gun-fire and, above, a great glory in the sky where wild mountainous clouds were all on fire in the sunset, and over Graincourt, still in a fury of shell-fire, a quiet stretch of the heavens which had been all blue until suddenly it was filled with little flame feathers as wisps of cloud were caught by the splendour of the day's last light. After that it was very dark, and as I went back through the woods the only light was where the white rays of the moon filtered through the branches and all the tree-trunks were black and sharp against the glare of bursting shells, with darkness in between them. Behind the lines camp-fires were being lighted in the hiding-places of the Tanks.

On the left our troops advanced towards Inchy at about half-past eight in the morning, and for a time were held up by the fierce machine-gun fire which swept down on their left from the east side of the Inchy road, although on the right they made good their advance without serious trouble.

A little patrol of Londoners crept out ahead of the main body and worked their way into a sap on the west side on the way to Pronville to feel the enemy's strength. They were fired at hotly by rifle volleys, and came back with their report. While this was happening our airmen, who were all over the battleground, flying very low and behaving with amazing and light-hearted audacity, reported that two battalions of the enemy's troops were advancing southwards on Mœuvres for a counter-attack. Our guns directed their fire on these columns, and so shattered them

that they do not seem to have come further, although it is probable that their survivors joined later attacks. Later in the morning the Germans were seen retiring south-east of Fontaine-Notre-Dame by La Folie Wood, and also by other observers were seen moving back on to Pronville, on the extreme left of our attack. They had abandoned five field-guns with plenty of their own ammunition.

After midday our troops were moving on Quarry Wood, west of the forest of Bourlon, and the Yorkshires of the 62nd Division had captured the southern side of the forest. Four Tanks went ahead of the infantry and entered the forest, crashing down its under-growth and small trees, and sweeping German machine-gun emplacements with Tank guns. With the North-country troops following them they took the crucifix in the wood, and went across a sunken road in which the enemy had been in strength. Here the enemy fought with great valour, and small parties of Germans put up a most desperate resistance.

Meanwhile the Scottish on the west side of the forest were going ahead above the old quarry in the outer glades, with the village of Fontaine on their right and many machine-guns there firing at them. Tanks forced their way into the village in spite of fires, and cleared out some of the enemy's snipers, who used their rifles from windows and loopholes in the walls.

Early in the afternoon news came back that our line ran half-way through Bourlon Wood down to the centre of La Folie Wood on the right, going across the Cambrai road south of Fontaine. In the wood itself there was close fighting all day long, and gun-fire ceased in this deep belt of trees because the infantry on both sides were within a few yards of each other, fighting with rifles and machine-guns from glade to glade and across barricades of tree-trunks, while Tanks climbed over fallen logs, crashed through undergrowth and trampled down stockades and emplacements. Before dusk the enemy made a desperate attempt to beat us back by violent counter-attacks from La

Folie Wood and over the ridge north-east of Fontaine-Notre-Dame. These were beaten off, and more Tanks moved up to make a final attack on the forest. The enemy had been driven back to the north-east corner, which was his last stand among the trees, although he was still defending the village of Bourlon on the edge of the wood, which we did not gain until last night, and where in the village there are still snipers and small groups of Germans in cellars and houses.

Tanks advancing to the north-east corner of the wood were held up by strong bodies of riflemen and grenadiers, who swarmed round them and tried to put them out of action. It was then that one of our flying-men went up and did a most astounding feat, though it was not more wonderful than many other exploits performed by our aviators, whom I saw flying so low that they seemed as though they would trim one's hair with their planes. He saw those German troops swarming round the Tanks and pounced on them, flying like a bat about them and strafing them with his Lewis gun. They fled from the roar of his engine and the beating of his wings and the bullets which came about them like raindrops, and many who could not escape lay dead and wounded in the undergrowth. The Tanks went on and gained nearly all the wood with the help of the infantry.

So on Friday night the situation seemed all in our favour. We had gained almost the entire forest of Bourlon, but the enemy still held the village on its north-west edge, and had maintained his line precariously outside Inchy and Mœuvres. All through the night there was heavy gunfire from the enemy batteries, and yesterday the battle was resumed with further attacks on Bourlon and repeated counter-attacks from the enemy throughout the morning and afternoon. By yesterday evening we had cleared the last Germans out of the forest, taken the village of Bourlon, forced the enemy half-way out of Mœuvres and repulsed all his counter-attacks with most bloody losses. It was a

day of great drama, and many hours of it were filled with strange and terrible interest because seldom, if ever before, have we seen so thrilling a picture of open warfare or such seething movement of men in fields of war.

NOVEMBER 27

THERE is still hard, nagging fighting in and about Bourlon Wood and village, westwards by Mœuvres, and eastwards around the half-burnt village of Fontaine-Notre-Dame.

The enemy continues to bring up reinforcements, and is massing them near Cambrai, although he can no longer detrain them there, as the station is under the fire of our guns, and the old town itself has been evacuated by civilians and all but fighting troops, and cleared of all material as hurriedly as possible. Some very sharp orders must have arrived from the German High Command to the Divisional Generals and regimental commanders holding the Cambrai area, for our capture of Bourlon forest menaces one of their most important lines of communications, apart from its threat to Cambrai, and desperate efforts are being made by the Third Guards' Division, and other new troops in this line, to wrest back the high ground on which that dark wood stands, famous through centuries of warfare as a strategical point. Last night at about ten o'clock another counter-attack was delivered against our lines in the forest, but it does not seem to have broken through our forward defences. From our side raids were made into the village of Bourlon on the north-west side of the wood, part of the object being to rescue some companies of East Surreys of the 40th Division who had been cut off by previous counter-attacks, and were holding out among ruined houses, surrounded by the enemy and without food or supplies. In the darkness of a bitter night, with cruel wind blowing and rain turning to sleet and snow, our men of the 62nd Division worked forward into Bourlon village and fought behind the cover of broken walls and through

bombarded houses, under bursts of machine-gun and rifle fire. I do not know yet any further details of this fighting, except that some of the East Surreys were rescued and brought back.

It is believed that other men of ours belonging to the Highland Light Infantry of the 40th Division remain in the village, holding out to the last gasp until they may be relieved in the same way by comrades who will fight hard to get them. Early this morning, on the right of the forest of Bourlon, where Fontaine-Notre-Dame is smouldering out into white ash and black ruin, except where some of its houses have been untouched by fire, one of our Brigades of Guards, including the Irish, Grenadier, Coldstream, and Scots Guards, moved forward to harry the German garrison, who had come back in strength, with many machine-guns, after our withdrawal last Wednesday. Our men have it seems, forced their way into a part of the village, in spite of the dreadful sweep of machine-gun fire from neighbouring houses and from La Folie Wood to the south-east.

After a spell of mild weather, which favoured us, in spite of rainy nights, at the beginning of this battle near Cambrai, it turned bitterly cold yesterday, and our men and horses had to suffer exposure in the savage and cutting wind on that wide stretch of open country, where there is no shelter for man or beast. Yesterday it was a real physical agony to endure that wind, which came over the bleak plains like the lash of a whip, and our gunners and mule drivers, who had been sitting in their saddles for hours, had a frozen look as they kept their steel helmets slanted to the gale, while their poor wet beasts trudged forward with their heads bent. The whole of our Army has moved beyond even the far view of ordinary comfort and standing habitations. They have behind them first the whole stretch of the Somme battlefields, where is no wood except a dead wood of naked trunks like gallows-trees, and no village except a rubbish-heap and a graveyard and a sign-

board, which says "Pozières" or "Combles" or "Guillemont," and where every road-track is bordered by little white crosses where sleep the heroes of the Somme in this wild waste of desolation, haunted by hidden horrors. Then they have behind them the country of the German retreat, when in the spring of this year the enemy stole away from Bapaume and Péronne, and from scores of villages beyond, after putting an explosive charge into every house and church and barn and pigsty and stable and château and factory and mill and dog-kennel and summer-house, so that nothing was left but brickdust and ashes and broken timbers and twisted iron and gateways which lead into mansions no longer there, and doorways which open into houses all tumbled down, and roofs which have fallen, sometimes with all their tiles in place, to the level of the earth, and here and there a crucifix at the crossways where the devil has made a merry hell. And now our fighting troops are beyond the Hindenburg line and the villages of Ribecourt and Marcoing and Graincourt and Flesquières and others, which are in ruin like all those ruins behind—twelve and fifteen miles behind. So there are no *estaminets* behind the lines of this fighting front into which our men can go for an hours' "fug," for a sing-song for an hour or two on their way to the Front, and no whole billets in which they can rest when they are relieved in the lines; and they seem like men in the middle of a great desert, enormously far from the civilized world, enormously lonely. They are lonely except for their own comradeship and their own playfulness and the help of *padres* and other friendly souls of the Church Army and the Y.M.C.A., who put up tents and huts in this wilderness and arrange a little entertainment of body and soul for men who otherwise would be parched for such things. So on a wall ploughed through with a monstrous shell-hole one sees "This way to the cinema," and on a board highly decorated in colours in the middle of a village which has fallen like a pack of cards one sees the friendly invitation, "Come to-night. The Bow

Bells variety entertainment now on. The greatest show in the battlefields," or words to that effect. This is the background of our battle in Bourlon Wood, and unless you can see that in the mind's eye you cannot picture the life of those men of ours who are fighting out there where Fontaine-Notre-Dame is smouldering in a girdle of machine-gun fire, and where the forest of Bourlon stands high and black on the ridge above Cambrai, and where the enemy's barrage draws a line of high explosive below Mœuvres and Inchy to the top of La Folie Wood.

NOVEMBER 28

THIS morning it was strangely quiet on the battle-front round Bourlon Wood. Hardly a gun of ours was firing when I went up by Havrincourt, and the enemy's artillery was almost silent. No noise of battle came through the heavy mist lying low over that black forest on the hill, and shrouding the little ruined town of Fontaine-Notre-Dame on its right flank. It was a sullen kind of peace after a day of most fierce fighting, as though both sides were taking a breathing space.

If one could look into Fontaine-Notre-Dame close enough to see the wreckage that lies there after the battle it would be a tragic sight. But I think no man may look into it now and live after his view, neither an English soldier nor a German soldier, because the little narrow streets which go between its burnt and broken houses are swept by machine-gun bullets from our machine-guns in the south and from the enemy's in the north, and no human being could stay alive there for a second after showing himself in the village. Once there was a fountain of pure water there, dedicated to Our Lady of Compassion, and French peasant women came there to touch the foreheads of their children with a few drops of it from their finger-tips, believing in its healing virtues. Yesterday no Lady of Compassion was there to help our poor suffering men. There was no compassion of any kind. Men fought in the streets

and in the broken houses and behind the walls and round about the ruins of the little church of Notre-Dame. To-day there are only dead bodies among the ruins and the patter of machine-gun bullets.

I have already given an outline of this battle yesterday, and there is not much to add to its essential facts, though there are some more details. Our men fought with great heroism, and the Germans of the 46th Regiment, with the 9th Grenadiers of the Third German Guards on their right, fought also with a most stubborn courage, defending themselves and coming back in counter-attacks fiercely and hard. They were some of our own battalions of Guards who attacked Fontaine-Notre-Dame, and on the left were Yorkshire battalions of the 62nd Division who advanced upon Bourlon village at the north-western end of Bourlon Wood.

Before the attack our line ran all round Bourlon Wood, dropping on the left towards Tadpole Copse, and on the right to the south of Fontaine, and away down below La Folie Wood. A successful advance would have swung up the whole line to include Bourlon village, and then struck south-east above the village of Fontaine. A glance at the map will show that the attack on Fontaine would be made from the south, and from Bourlon Wood on the west, and that was the disposition of our troops when they advanced. Before the battle our artillery laid down a heavy barrage of high explosives and shrapnel in advance of the infantry, and concentrated a violent fire on the enemy's rear positions and strong points, and it was behind these lines of shell-fire that our troops went forward. They were assisted by a number of Tanks, both in the attack on Fontaine-Notre-Dame and on the left on Bourlon village.

Let me deal with the left first, as I have heard the facts this morning from Yorkshiremen of the 62nd Division who have just come back from it.

The Tanks went before them, slowly but very steadily and successfully over broken ground, breaking down tree-stumps and undergrowth, and firing rapidly with their guns,

so that as they got forward groups of Germans were routed out from their hiding-places and surrendered if they were not killed by the sweep of fire. The line of the Tanks and of the following infantry was in an easterly curve on the western side of Bourlon village, striking at the heart of it. On the extreme left, invisible at any distance, were six German machine-guns, and they raked our troops with a most harassing enfilade fire, so that they could not make much headway. Their right battalions were screened from this, and were able to work up on the eastern edge of the village as far as the railway to the north of it, fighting all the way against groups of German Guards with machine-guns and rifles, so that there were many hand-to-hand encounters and a most bitter struggle. It was then, as I wrote yesterday, that they rescued the officers and men of the East Surreys, who had been isolated in the village and had been holding out with great gallantry until help reached them.

Many prisoners of the German Grenadiers were taken, and I saw a large batch of them to-day as they came marching down under escort and stood staring through the barbed wire of their enclosure. They were a powerful body of men, and put up a big hard fight. So the situation remains to-day, as far as I know, in the neighbourhood of Bourlon village.

The attack on Fontaine-Notre-Dame attained its object in the first stage of the attack, but not without great difficulty, putting the Guards to a high test of discipline and courage, in which they lived nobly up to their great traditions.

In spite of our heavy gun-fire the German machine-guns had not been destroyed, and that weapon showed once more the powerful influence it has in defending a position of this kind. During the past two or three days the enemy has sneaked a large number of machine-guns into the village, hiding them in the ruins and holes, and he had batches of picked snipers behind the walls, and on the broken roofs,

and between the timbers of the half-burnt houses. From La Folie Wood, on the right flank of the Guards, came blasts of this fire, and from Fontaine-Notre-Dame swept a stream of bullets. There was bloody hand-to-hand fighting with bayonet and rifle and club, but 500 of the enemy were taken prisoner, and came down safely behind our lines, as I saw them this morning, pale and haggard after this battle, but still strong and grim-looking men. Among them was a regimental commanding officer, a man equal in rank to one of our brigadiers, who is now very sick at heart because he had only looked into Fontaine to establish communications and give orders for defence when he was caught by our attack. He slept this morning under a little tarpaulin shelter, with two of his own men waiting outside as orderlies, and in another enclosure near to him 300 or more of his regiment, who had become prisoners of the Guards, and were luckier than their comrades who lie dead in the streets of Fontaine-Notre-Dame.

It was a hard position to attack in such conditions, but the Guards were never stopped, and they went forward across the open ground, keeping marvellous order, and going forward with splendid discipline behind a squadron of Tanks. The German machine-gunners held their fire until the Irish Guards had made 300 yards, and then opened on them. But these tall Irish lads took the village at a rush, and got in among the enemy. At the same time Coldstreamers swept on either side of the sand-pit opposite them; the Grenadiers made their way into the edge of the village, and the Scots worked round on the right. Together they fought their way into the streets, and house by house, wall by wall, ruin by ruin, routed out the German garrison and killed their machine-gun menace, and took possession of Fontaine-Notre-Dame.

So far all was well in our attack, and the Guards had won a brilliant little victory after severe fighting. Later in the morning the enemy brought up powerful reserves, and delivered a very strong counter-attack, preceded by intense

fire. The Guards could not remain in the village as a target for all this fire, and had not had time to organize their defences strongly enough to hold the place without heavy losses. It was, therefore, decided to withdraw their line a little, and they fell back to the edge of the village, keeping the streets of Fontaine under the fire of their machine-guns, so that no living German may show himself there. For the moment, therefore, Fontaine-Notre-Dame seems to be a No Man's Land and one of those sinister spots where there is no life, but only the signs of death.

NOVEMBER 29

AFTER the heavy fighting round Bourlon Wood, the battle-front to-day was astoundingly quiet. During the night the enemy shelled our positions in and about the forest and some of our recently captured villages, like Graincourt and Anneux, but this morning, when I went up beyond our old line at Hermies into the open country on the left of the Canal du Nord and the Grand Ravin the guns were quiet on both sides, and only a few shells passed on either side until, later in the morning, the enemy put a barrage down for a time south of Bourlon Wood. All this is so different from the Flanders Front, where one cannot go a step beyond Ypres or even so far without hearing the abominable noise of 5.9's or seeing a shell burst uncomfortably near, that there is a very curious sense of fantasy in walking about the battlefields within full view of the enemy's positions and without any sinister emotion. There is tussocky grass beneath one's feet, and only a few shell-holes here and there to remind one that the war is close. The German trenches which are now behind our own front, are as neat as when they were first dug and organized, and not flung into wild shapelessness by storms of shell-fire like those of the Somme and Flanders. Villages like Ribecourt and Masnières still have roofs above their walls, and the woods of Bourlon and Havrincourt Park and La Folie have not been slashed to death by high explosives, but in this winter

of war have all their branches interlaced like Gothic tracery, so that they are beautiful in sunlight or storm.

The sunlight was upon the forest of Bourlon to-day, and above that great dark mass of trees rising over the undulating ground to the highest knoll, for which the enemy has fought in a series of most desperate counter-attacks, was a long, low line of blue sky wonderfully clear for an autumn day, so that one had far visibility, and on the right the towers and spires of Cambrai rose clear and fine below the clouds. It was difficult to believe that the village of Bourlon was still in the enemy's hands after the desperate fighting in and out. The trees of the forest straggle out to it, and before these battles it was enclosed and hidden in the glades. But here—and it is only here—the concentration of our shell-fire has crashed into that little woodland and lopped off the branches and torn some of the trunks to tatters, so that they begin to have the gallows-tree look of other woods of war. A few low, dark masses among the trunks show where the cottages of Bourlon village stood, and where two days ago Yorkshiremen, following some Tanks, went into a most bloody fight, and struggled to gain and hold these ruins against the nests of machine-gunners and swarms of riflemen. This morning it was all quiet there, and there was no sign of strife about it. All the activity of war seemed to be in the sky rather than on the earth, and owing to the wonderful visibility of the morning hours many of our aeroplanes were up, flying about the sky in fighting formations, crossing the German lines on reconnaissance, and engaging hostile planes who were trying to use the light of day to see any movement of troops behind our lines.

Caught napping on the first day of the battle, the German air service has tried on the later days to get back some kind of power on this front, and this morning some of their best flyers were about, having no doubt been drafted down from other parts of the Front. I feel sure that it will have been a great day of battle in the air when the records come

in, for there was continual machine-gun fire overhead and unseen combats in the clouds. The most sensational thing I saw was the exploit of a German airman, a cool and audacious fellow, who slipped through our fighting formations when they had gone into other sky spaces, and made straight as an arrow for one of our kite balloons or "sausages." I had passed that Rupert of ours and its home behind our lines, and had watched it swaying in the wind in the blue stretch of sky overlooking the enemy's line. Then I had gone beyond it and was looking at the towers of Cambrai, when I saw a single aeroplane drop out of a cloud and come very straight and low towards us. There had been a lot of anti-aircraft gunning before, and the sky was full of black puffs of German shrapnel, but now our Archies began to fire rapidly and a group of our soldiers standing close to me raised their rifles like men when a covey of partridges has been put up, and they took pot-shots at this low-flying bird, which passed straight over our heads. It flew in a bee-line for our balloon, which suddenly began to haul down. It was too late to get safe to earth. The German aeroplane poised and stooped to it. A second later the balloon broke into red flame, became a torch of fire, and fell like a rocket, with a long blazing tail, terribly beautiful in its descent. For that second those of us who were watching held our breath, thinking of the two observers who had been in the basket up there. But before the second had passed something fell below the flaming trail, something small and black, and then above it something else, like a white wisp of cloud, appeared above it, spreading out. One man had escaped in his parachute. Less than another second passed, and then another black object fell, and the white cloud opened above him, and together, one slightly higher than the other, these two men floated earthwards, dangerously near the long tail of flame which had been their balloon. A little nearer, and they would have been caught in its downward rush of fire, but I saw them swaying and falling very gently, like puffballs,

until they touched the earth. The German airman, after his straight flight and shot, whisked round and fled into the nearest cloud, chased by a flight of ours who had come round the sky at full speed, when they saw the burning of the balloon. It was a bold adventure of the German pilot—a slight set-off for many exploits of the same kind done by our flying men during recent days.

For two days now the infantry on both sides have made no further attack or counter-attack. Whatever may happen next the balance of success is ours on this ground, where our troops and Tanks went far through the Hindenburg line, captured well over 10,000 prisoners, and now dominate the enemy's line of communications through Cambrai.

V

The German Counter-Thrust

November 30

The enemy this morning has made a determined effort to drive us back from our newly captured positions, and at about 7.30, after a very violent bombardment, with the use of many gas shells, delivered a heavy attack with massed storm troops against our lines round Bourlon Wood. Going up towards the Front before knowing that this new battle was impending, I saw the enemy's fierce bombardment of our lines and other signs of intense conflict. Places where I have been during the past ten days watching this open warfare around Bourlon Wood without seeing much hostile shelling except on the immediate line of attack or counter-attack, were now being swept by fire, and the sky was full of the black smoke clouds of German shrapnel and with the shrill whine of it. It was obvious that the comparative quietude of the days following our last attack on Fontaine-Notre-Dame has been used by the enemy to bring up more guns and store up supplies of ammunition, in order to sup-

port the new attack to-day. It was remarkable to see the range and intensity of his fire, and he was shooting as far back as Bapaume, which is now a long way behind our lines. Many squadrons of our aeroplanes were overhead. The enemy's thrust against our positions round the forest of Bourlon was supported by masses of men, who succeeded in driving through for some distance on the west side of the forest, but were checked and driven back by our troops, who fought with the utmost gallantry and self-sacrifice. The battle is still in progress there, but from the latest reports it seems that the enemy has had to retire, after most bloody losses.

Sir Julian Byng's strategy and victory when our troops broke through the Hindenburg line and swept into the country round Cambrai challenged the enemy to open warfare. He has apparently accepted the challenge. It will be a new opportunity for generalship.

DECEMBER 1

IT was inevitable, after our surprise victory on November 20 and our break through the Hindenburg lines to the country round Cambrai, that the dangers as well as the advantages of open warfare should return on this part of the Front.

Our advance, taking in Bourlon Wood on the north and ground beyond Masnières and Marcoing, Gonnelieu and Villers-Guislan on the right, had made for us a new and rather perilous salient, which might tempt the enemy to retaliate heavily for the blow we had dealt him. During the past week he seemed to concentrate his efforts entirely on the northern side of this salient, by desperate attacks and counter-attacks on Bourlon Wood, Fontaine-Notre-Dame, and our lines west of Bourlon Wood by the village of Mœuvres; but meanwhile he was concentrating heavy forces with great secrecy, as we had assembled ours, on our right flank by Crèvecœur and Lateau Wood and opposite Villers-Guislan, in order to strike through at the

weakest part of our salient, and so, if he had luck, cut off large numbers of our men and guns.

The attack delivered yesterday morning had ambitious plans, and was directed from the north to pierce southwards to the Cambrai road, past the west side of Bourlon Wood, while what was possibly a heavier attack was delivered suddenly on our eastern or right flank in the direction of Gonnelieu and Villers-Guislan. The northern attack failed, as I will tell later, with most bloody losses to the enemy. The southern attack had a success, which put a most severe strain upon our generalship and the disciplined courage of our troops. Unfortunately the enemy was able to capture some of our guns which were very far forward, but some of these have been recovered after being in his hands for a few hours.

After the comparative quietude along this part of the Front, which I described in a recent message, the enemy began a violent bombardment on and around Bourlon Wood on Thursday afternoon. This died down after dusk, and there was a fairly quiet night. There was no sign of a great attack until, about 7.30 on Friday morning, the enemy fired vast numbers of gas shells over our positions round the forest of Bourlon, and made a strong artillery demonstration all along the northern side of the salient, from Mœuvres on the west spreading eastward to Marcoing and Masnières. This was followed later in the north by heavy infantry attacks with masses of men on the west side of Bourlon Wood.

On our right flank the attack began suddenly without a violent bombardment, and many battalions advancing with immense numbers of machine-guns debouched against our lines from Crèvecœur, where they made straight for Villers-Guislan. We were holding our forward positions here thinly, and when this sudden weight of men was flung against them they were forced to give way and the enemy's columns broke through our lines rapidly, and the surprise of the attack was so great for a little while that in most

cases our men were only aware of the enemy's break through when they saw his troops swarming close to them.

A young gunner told me this morning that he was with his battery between La Vacquerie and Gonnelieu when, at about 7.30 yesterday morning, he heard an officer shout "Stand to your guns!" He rushed out of his dug-out to his battery and saw, only 300 yards away, a number of German soldiers advancing with machine-guns. This team of British gunners, with their officers, did not lose their nerve, although the surprise was stupefying. The officers gave orders for the direct laying of the guns on the enemy's ranks, and they actually fired some rounds and tore gaps in the German lines. But others ran forward, and were so close that our gunners were almost surrounded before they abandoned the battery and ran for safety. Three of the officers were hit by rifle or machine-gun fire, but the other gunners made their escape and joined the infantry. Afterwards they were given rifles and took part in the counter-attack which recaptured Gouzeaucourt and drove the enemy back.

DECEMBER 2

IN other parts of the field bodies of our men were caught by surprise through the rapidity of the first enemy advance, though the attack as a whole was not unexpected. In the neighbourhood of Marcoing and Masnières the men off duty in some of our English battalions—Middlesex, Royal Fusiliers, and others of the 29th Division—had been sleeping in cellars and ruined cottages when the sentries gave the shout of "Stand to!" and all the men were hurried out to line up in the roads. Some of them told me yesterday that they saw the enemy advancing over high ground south of Masnières in large numbers, and it was clear at a glance that our more advanced lines had been bent in. There does not seem to have been a direct attack on Masnières or Marcoing at that time, but some parties of the enemy swung to the right and got into Les Rues Vertes, which is a suburb

of Masnières, and were shattered by the machine-gun fire of our men, who also swept the ridge south of the St.-Quentin Canal, so that many German soldiers were seen to fall.

"We strafed them properly," said a boy who had just come out of the battle with a bullet in his arm," but Fritz put down a frightful shell-fire into Marcoing this morning. And it wasn't a picnic for us."

It was at Gouzeacourt that the surprise was greatest on Friday morning. This village was well behind the line of our recent advance, and had been organized as a forward station for wounded and some other purposes. It was here that many civilians were sent after their rescue from Masnières, those poor women with babies and perambulators and pet dogs who made such a strange pitiful crowd on the morning among our guns and cavalry and German prisoners. We had a big field ambulance among the ruins, with a body of splendid young doctors, who worked like heroes and were very merry and bright when I went up to see them on the way to further fields. Many members of this little community believed themselves safe from the danger of front-line positions, though they did not believe that their immunity from shell-fire would last for ever. Early on Friday morning most of the hospital staff was asleep before the toil of the day. Some of the orderlies were up making coffee for the doctors. One medical officer was in his rubber bath, and had just lathered himself very successfully with soap. In Gouzeacourt there was the stretching of arms of tired fellows who wanted another hour's sleep, and the yawning of men who wake to another day of strenuous work and the fragrance of coffee and frizzling bacon, which is the English soldier's incense to the gods of the dawn. Suddenly shots rang out. They were very close. The merry and bright young doctors sat up and listened. The man with the lather of soap on his body put his head out of his tent. More shots snapped out, like the cracking of whips, and they were right among the ruins of Gouzeaucourt. The enemy was there among

them. He was inside Gouzeaucourt and all round it. The lathered man put a towel round his body and, as one of his comrades told me, hared down the street. Other men ran, and so got away. On the outskirts of the village some pioneers retreated down the road to Fins, but in Gouzeaucourt most of the field ambulance staff found themselves in the hands of the enemy, with railwaymen and mule drivers and engineers and odds and ends of units who had been working in the place.

By a queer chance I was on the road to Gouzeaucourt that morning, and it was only by a fluke of luck that I did not fall into the hands of the enemy. If I had been fifteen minutes earlier, or if I had not sensed something strange on the road, I should not have been writing this message. A friend of mine in the car with me was in sprightly humour, rather too sprightly I thought for such an early hour on a cold morning. He amused himself by the thought of what would happen if we got pinched by the enemy in Gouzeaucourt or Villers-Pluich after a German break through. It was an uncanny conversation in view of what has happened, for neither of us had a ghost of an idea that such a thing was likely. It was at Fins that both of us began staring about curiously. There were a lot of men on the road coming in our direction. There was something queer about them. They were in odd groups, walking quietly without disorder, like labourers who have done their day's job and amble quietly home down the roads. A young gunner officer came up.

"What has happened?" we asked. "The enemy has broken through," said the gunner officer. We were silent for a second, as men are silent who hear incredible things. Then one of us asked, "Where is the enemy?" The gunner officer pointed down the road and said, "There; this side of Gouzeaucourt."

That was our little morning surprise, and we got the car round pretty quick. Then we tried to approach the Front by a different road, to the left up by Havrincourt and

Hermies, and on the way saw and heard other strange things. Some of our artillery was on the move. We saw them galloping across the fields. In a quiet place the gunners stood to their guns, as though expecting an attack, but were not yet firing. Men were packing up ammunition dumps and hospitals. In some places where on earlier days there had been much activity there was now a look of quietude.

An officer rode up to us, and we asked him to tell us the situation on the north of the salient, for which we were heading. "The Boche is putting up a big attack," he said, "but so far we seem to be holding him. Anyhow, he has not got near this place."

The news had not spread everywhere. In one field some Tommies were playing football. In some camps men were frying their breakfast bacon, as though all the world were at peace. We knew more about it then. We knew that north as well as south of the salient our men were fighting hard to hold back the enemy, and that our right wing was for the moment in jeopardy. As we got towards Havrincourt we saw the whole line of our northern front by Bourlon Wood under shell-fire. The quietude of the past days was gone, and places where I had spent many hours on the way to the battlefields were fiery furnaces. Havrincourt Wood and the roads below it were under an intense bombardment. The enemy was flinging shells down the Bapaume-Cambrai road. Bourlon Wood, now held by the 47th (London) Division, and all the fields and villages to the left of it were filled with clouds of smoke from high explosives, and for miles our own guns were sweeping a fury of drumfire over the advancing enemy.

It was then that the enemy was trying to break through past Bourlon forest on the left and cut off the northern side of the salient. As we know now this northern attack, which started two hours after that on the right wing, was supported by six to seven divisions, who advanced behind storms of gas shells and high explosives.

For a time our troops had to yield ground, and some bodies of the enemy penetrated almost as far as the sugar factory on the Cambrai road, but were there repulsed by our men, who fought with enormous gallantry. They were then caught by our artillery fire, and these masses of men were forced into retreat and our guns followed them up, raking them as they went and slaughtering them. Our infantry followed them, too, with machine-gun and rifle fire, and re-established our line except for a bit of trench below Mœuvres. This northern attack of the enemy had failed utterly, with bloody losses, and that menace to our lines was for the day removed.

Overhead the sky was blackened by our aircraft. I have seen many of our aeroplanes before on days of battle, but never so many squadrons and flights and single scouts as on Friday, when they were like flocks of crows over the enemy's lines. There was aerial fighting all day, for enemy planes came out in large numbers also, and challenged our men to this deadly tournament in the skies. At 7.30 there were thirty hostile planes over the Bonavis Farm area, and many fired white lights continuously over Gouzeaucourt and Gonnelieu and Villers-Guislan.

All through Friday morning the situation was somewhat critical on the right by Gouzeaucourt, but it was relieved in the afternoon by magnificent counter-attacks by the Guards and some dismounted cavalry and Tanks and bodies of troops who had been retreating, fighting all the way, and holding the enemy back by rear-guard actions with rifle-fire and machine-gun fire. Some of these men have told me that they fought all the way back like this in short rushes, lying down for volley-firing, then getting up and retreating before the advancing swarms of men, then lying down again for another bout of rifle-fire. They could not hold back the enemy. Some of their comrades were cut off, and it was up to the Guards to deliver a decisive counter-attack in the afternoon.

The Germans had cavalry behind their infantry ready to

pour through any serious gap in our lines. I saw the Guards on their way to this battle of Friday afternoon till Saturday morning. It was a thrilling and noble sight as the men marched down the roads towards Gouzeaucourt, knowing that in a few hours they would be fighting in a terrific way. They were tall and proper men, and they marched with full packs, but did not seem to feel the weight of them. They were led on by their bands playing gay music, with a fine, swinging rhythm in it, and these men stepped out jauntily, whistling and singing to the march tunes. Some of them were smoking their pipes, and others were munching apples and chocolate, and others were marching silently and thoughtfully, as though seeing ahead of them the battle into which they would soon be plunged. So they passed, and when I met some of them again they were seated in trucks of a train, covered with blankets to shelter them from the shrewd wind, so that it was all dark inside when I lifted the flap and looked at the rows of faces under bandaged heads, and with bodies lying there grievously wounded. They had fought their fight, and driven back the enemy beyond Gouzeaucourt and Quentin Ridge and Gonnelieu, and had broken the gravest part of the German menace.

Before our counter-attack on Gouzeaucourt on Friday afternoon, followed by a further battle next morning at six, the enemy had had time to organize his defence, and his storm troops had brought up not only large numbers of machine-guns, but also field-guns with each battalion, to destroy our Tanks, which they expected to come back upon them. They had been ordered to attack and hold with all their strength. As we know from a captured order, their army-general had told them, in high-sounding words, that the English surprise attack, supported by masses of Tanks, had gained a victory near Cambrai, but now this victory was to be changed into defeat by the valour of German soldiers and the help of God. They were men of the 34th, 220th, 9th Reserve, 107th, and 28th Divisions,

the last having been brought up fresh for this attack from the French Front at Laon. They were good troops, but they could not stand against the Guards and our dismounted cavalry and other English units.

On Friday afternoon the Guards attacked from the direction of Trescault, and another body of them from near Metz. They were met by the fiercest machine-gun fire, but enveloped Gouzeaucourt and fought their way into the village and beyond it, driving out the enemy by a hard struggle at close quarters, against snipers, machine-gunners, and bodies of riflemen under the cover of walls. Some of the infantry fled as soon as the Guards entered the village, but the machine-gunners fought a stubborn rear-guard action, and it was difficult to clear Gouzeaucourt of isolated groups, During their brief tenure of the place they had not been able to remove much of our material, and our dressing-station was very much as it had been left. Some of its personnel was rescued, with other men who had been hiding in cellars, and shell-craters, including some American railway men who, as I will tell in another message, had had astounding adventures.

The enemy retired that evening on to Quentin Ridge and Gauche Wood, and held in strong force the high ground of Lateau Wood, from which our 12th Division had withdrawn with most of their guns. On the following morning, which was yesterday, the battle was resumed, and another attack by our infantry drove the enemy back from the Ridge and the Gauche Wood, and out through Gonnelieu, where we took some 300 prisoners and forty machine-guns, and recaptured a number of our guns which had been in the enemy's hands, as well as some of their own guns, which we took in the original advance on November 20.

Our troops were helped enormously by the gallant work of the Tanks, whose crews advanced on the enemy and fought with the highest courage. The enemy's field-guns were brought into action against them at close range, but the crew of each Tank fought regardless of all risk, and got

in among the enemy with their guns and caused great havoc among them. It was a battle fought almost without artillery on our side on this right wing, and our men had to advance against the most terrible machine-gun barrage they have ever known, so that it was sheer human valour which drove the enemy back and re-established the part of our line below Masnières and Marcoing, so relieving our situation for a time of its chief menace.

LATER

DURING last night we withdrew in the region of Masnières in order to straighten our line and get back from a position made untenable, because of the enemy's holding Lateau Wood and the ridges to the south-east of this village. It was after a series of attacks by the enemy, nine separate attacks during the day, in which more German soldiers were killed, it is reckoned, than ever before in the same time. It was a massacre of men, and dead bodies were piled on dead bodies and wounded on wounded by the sweep of our men's machine-gun and rifle fire.

I have already told how the first waves of the Germans flowed up into Les Rues Vertes, the southern suburb of Masnières, and were beaten back by our men of the 29th Division. After that successive bodies of storm troops tried to force their way into these streets. Nine times they came on, and nine times they were repulsed with great slaughter, getting no further than this outer suburb, where they seized some of the houses and held their outposts. Our men launched their final counter-attack after five o'clock yesterday afternoon, and cleared the enemy out and took groups of prisoners. In the litter of battle they found a German officer's message to his commander, saying that his position was untenable owing to the greatness of his losses and the severity of our counter-attacks.

VI

From Gonnelieu to Gouzeacourt

December 3

Before German troops advanced in their violent attack against our lines, which began last Friday morning and has been renewed to-day on our right wing with fresh troops, they were commanded in the order of the day by their army-general to retake all the ground lost by our victory on November 20, and promised that if they captured six kilometres they would gain peace. The German army on our front has been fighting for a long time under the impulse of these illusory promises of peace. There was to be peace if they held out till August, there was to be peace if they won the battle of Flanders; now there is to be peace if they gain the six kilometres of ground lost less than a fortnight ago. It is a pitiful thing, revealing the peace hunger of men who see nothing but slaughter ahead of them unless they can end this war. But to be just to them they are fighting now as hard as ever they have fought, and with a proud and savage spirit.

A few days ago, when our North-country infantry of the 62nd Division made their magnificent attack on Bourlon village, some of the German officers refused to surrender to the accursed English, as they called us. Two of them blew out their brains rather than be taken prisoner, and a non-commissioned officer committed *hara-kiri* before our men by thrusting a bayonet through his entrails. That is proof of the bitterness with which these Germans are fighting. Those men belonged to the Cockchafers, or Maikaefer, who were shattered by the Welsh in the early days of the Flanders fighting, but other regiments not so famous are sacrificing themselves in their desperate attacks against us, as on the last day of last month, when they came down west of Bourlon Wood shoulder to shoulder in massed

lines, and were mown down by machine-guns and the rifle-fire of our troops and by our field-guns, who never had such human targets.

To-day's attack is another thrust from a front extending between Vendhuille and Epéhy, with its spear-heads directed against La Vacquerie, Gonnelieu, and other places east of Gouzeaucourt, and south of Masnières. A new German division has been brought from Flanders for this new attempt to break our lines. It is the eighth. The enemy's attack began this morning with violent destructive fire on a wide front following a storm of gas shells put over during the night, and a big battle is now in progress, with most intense fighting round Gonnelieu and La Vacquerie and south of Marcoing.

It is too soon to give any details, and few reports have come back, but our troops are holding their lines with heroic valour against enormous forces. So did those battalions fight who stood the first shock of attack last Friday morning, when the enemy broke through to Gouzeaucourt.

Round by Gonnelieu there were Lancashire troops of the 55th Division who had fought also in our original advance on the extreme right. "They must have fought like tigers" is the verdict of troops near them, but the story of their last stand cannot yet be told.

Before I could mention our withdrawal from Masnières on Sunday night, I gave a few details of the last fighting there, and that also is a wonderful story of human heroism. Our men of the 29th Division had to encounter nine German attacks in great force advancing into the suburb of Les Rues Vertes under the protection of frightful bombardment. They repulsed these attacks nine times with machine-gun and rifle fire until enemy officers sent back word that their position in this suburb was untenable and they had to retreat from our annihilating fire. But by this time Masnières was at the end of a sharp salient formed by the enemy's gain of the ridge below, and during the night, according to orders, our men withdrew unknown to the

enemy, who were busy with their dead and wounded. Even on Sunday morning the Germans did not know that not a single English soldier remained in Masnières, and they bombarded it anew before sending forward more storm troops in the afternoon, when they discovered its abandonment.

Yesterday afternoon at the same time they made three separate attacks on La Vacquerie, and each time were shattered by machine-gun and rifle fire, so that the ground is strewn with their dead.

Fighting just as hard and just as terrible made a horror of Gonnelieu, where the Lancashire men of the 55th Division were fighting. The streets of that village are littered with bodies, and the place must be a shambles. It is difficult to calculate the German losses since that hour of 7.30 on Friday morning, when they made their tremendous attempt to reverse our victory of November 20, and to recapture their lost ground. We have inevitably suffered heavy losses, too, in this enormous struggle to beat back the enemy's massed forces and to hold our lines against great fire. But the enemy's losses in attack must be fantastic in their tragic numbers. Our machine-gun fire has swept their ranks time and time and again, mowing down long lines of men, and in the northern part of the attack especially our artillery had cut swathes in their battalions.

I have described in as much detail as possible what happened at Gouzeaucourt and neighbourhood, when the enemy drove in our line and swept forward over some of our newly gained ground, but I have not yet told much about the beginning of that attack, the most ambitious part of the attack on the northern side of the salient that same morning. All through the night it had been quiet about Bourlon Wood. At 4.30, before dawn, our men there and on the left by Tadpole Copse and troops to the right of Mœuvres reported all quiet. It was not until several hours later that one or two abrupt messages came back from the front line, and then no more. "Enemy advancing on us." "Heavy concentration of hostile troops coming down past

Quarry Wood." "Enemy approaching our brigade headquarters."

Approaching brigade headquarters! Why, that was well behind our lines. If that were true the enemy must have broken through in depth, and there would be the devil to pay. It was not true about brigade headquarters. The message was in error, and meant to say the battalion headquarters, which was quite another thing, but it gave a shock to the officers who were receiving other messages from their right, reporting that the enemy had broken through at Gonnelieu and Villers-Guislan, and that later he was on the west side of Gouzeaucourt, and that many of our men had been surrounded. A shock, but nothing to cause loss of nerve to men who know that a large sum of human life depends on their coolness to deal with a crisis like this.

"Are your guns all right?" went a question down the wire, and the answer came back, "We're all right; killing them in hundreds."

At 9.15 A.M. large bodies of German troops, to the strength of a division, were seen entering Mœuvres. An hour later our S O S went up on the west side of the Canal du Nord, and thirty-five minutes later on the east side of the canal.

Long waves of men in field grey—no need to ask their business—were seen coming like slow-moving waves over the rolling ground towards the Bapaume-Cambrai road, south-west of Bourlon Forest. Our men of the 2nd Division, which had relieved the 36th Ulster Division on November 27, and of the 47th (London) Division, saw them lying behind machine-guns, lying in tussocky grass with rifles ready, standing on the fire-step of trenches below Mœuvres, on the west bank of the canal, and standing to the guns, field-batteries, and howitzers in open country not far back from these advancing hordes.

Our men were staring at these grey fellows who came over with packs on their backs. "Looked as if they was

come to stay," said a Cockney fellow afterwards, and then he added with a grim laugh, "and they was." Some of them stayed alive, and many of them stayed dead. Our machine-guns were arranged for an attack like this. They had been waiting for it. They had arranged direct barrage-fire and enfilade-fire to kill an attack or counter-attack any way it should come. And now on that Friday morning they let go, and fired as our machine-gunners have rarely fired before, in steady sweeps of bullets, belt after belt, till each machine-gun team had a great litter of spent belts lying around them.

One battery alone fired over 70,000 rounds at no fewer than ten successive waves of German infantry. As we know from prisoners, they were Germans of the 49th, 16th, and 20th Divisions. These men advanced with more than Oriental dedication to death. The foremost lines were swept by machine-gun, rifle, and artillery fire, and fell dead and wounded in the grass. Other men came behind them and fell. Others followed, and others, and others, these waves of field-grey fellows, and always they came a little nearer in spite of their losses, survivors closing up the ranks and coming forward until they were within about 1000 yards of our machine-guns, still sweeping them as scythes sweep a line of wheat. Then in the centre they wavered, broke and fled followed by all our fire, by heavy artillery as well as light artillery and rifle fire and more machine-gun fire. Only on the German right and our left did the enemy enter our line, that was in the trenches on the outskirts of Mœuvres, just north of the Cambrai road, where we held a German communication trench running up at right angles from the old German trench system now in our hands.

Our men here had to retreat from that isolated bit of trench, and to abandon about 200 yards of old German support trench, but not without hard fighting. It was fighting with bayonet and bombs, and it is still fighting with bayonets and bombs, for it is going on now as for three days past, and the Royal Fusiliers told me they have been

killing Germans all that time, and terrible slaughter was done by the South Staffordshires, Middlesex Regiment, Berkshires, 1st King's Royal Rifles, and the Oxford and Bucks of the 2nd Division. Before these trenches there is a litter of dead, but more where the long lines came over west of Bourlon Wood, and, like water instead of human life, followed in wave after wave, and were spilt upon the earth. Thirty prisoners have been taken in the trenches where the enemy penetrated. They talk of their losses like men who have seen a great tragedy; incredible losses, if one did not know the truth. They believe that the German High Command will not order another attack like that because of its cost, but there they have more belief in the humanity of the German High Command than experience warrants or the law of war. Perhaps the enemy has not abandoned his original hope of regaining all the ground we took from him when the Tanks and troops broke the Hindenburg lines, and will go to far lengths of sacrifice in blood and agony to achieve this purpose.

In the past fortnight our troops have done so many marvellous acts of courage that I despair of ever giving more than faint far-off glimpses of the great sum of valour revealed in all these attacks and counter-attacks. I wish I could give the names of many single men, like one brilliant young soldier who now lies dead, and whose life was a fine promise of genius to our Army; but the rules are against it, and even in the time I have, writing between one battle and another, I can only scramble down a few broad pictures of all this struggle. The spirit of our men in this fighting has never been more audacious in attack, nor more enduring in defence. In attack it is shown, as one example out of a hundred, when two young Yorkshire officers on the night before Sir Julian Byng's historic victory, out in advance of a Tank in trouble, crawled through the enemy's barbed wire by Havrincourt and reconnoitred the ground so well that many lives were saved by their guidance, and the few scraps I had written about these North-country

troops of the 62nd Division who fought through Bourlon village on November 27 do no justice to the most amazing fight, in which they beat back the enemy from buried houses, fighting from wall to wall, gained high ground which had been lost in the Bourlon Wood by heavy counter-attacks, wired it that night and made it secure in defence.

It was a Yorkshire officer belonging to the 185th Brigade of the 62nd Division who rescued the East Surreys left in Bourlon village, 500 of them, with seven officers. A signaller came back through the enemy's lines with news of their plight, and then collapsed after handing in his message. The officer volunteered to go into the village and guide the East Surreys back. He went in right through the enemy's lines, through streets of dead and German machine-gun posts, and it was his guidance which helped to save the East Surreys. London men and Lancashire men have done acts as brave as this, which one day must be told.

DECEMBER 2

I HAD not time to tell yesterday of my meeting by chance a number of American railwaymen and engineers who had been engaged in construction work near Gouzeaucourt, and running up trains laden with supplies for our troops in the neighbourhood of Villers-Pluich and Villers-Guislan. I saw these men yesterday morning after they had been surrounded by the enemy for hours, and had then, with great cunning, made their escape to our lines. They are a splendid body of men, hard and keen and good-humoured, who made a joke of their thrilling adventure and of their present danger, which was not at an end, as the enemy was putting over heavy shells at odd moments, and one burst with an enormous explosion only 100 yards or so away from them when I stood among them.

"I guess I had a near call," said one of them from St. Louis, Missouri, and he told me how when he was standing by his train, which had a full load of rations for the English troops, he was suddenly startled by shells bursting

round his engine and saw the enemy approaching over the ridge by Villers-Guislan.

"One of your Tommies was standing near me," said the American, "and he bent down and picked up a bit of shrapnel, and said, 'Blowed if it ain't hot,' and then he looked up again and said, 'I'm blessed if old Fritz hasn't gone and broken through.' Just as he said that, a shell burst close, and the poor lad was killed, not an arm's length away from me. I guessed it was time to quit, and I ran hard and found the enemy all round me. So I took to hiding in a shell-hole, and lay there until this morning."

Four of his comrades in the engine crew had the same experience, and one was wounded in the thigh, but they all had the luck to escape. Another American engineman was first startled by a German aeroplane, which came straight down the track near Villers-Pluich, flying very low and firing a machine-gun.

"I hadn't a steel hat handy," said this man, "so I picked up a petrol tin and put that on my head, and thought it might be better than nothing. Then I saw Germans, and thought to myself this is a queer kind of fix for a fellow from America laying rails behind the English lines, so I crouched down behind the engine and hoped the Germans wouldn't see me. I guess they didn't, or I shouldn't be here."

Another American came up with a grin on his face. "I'm from Tennessee," he said, and he was a tall, lean, swarthy fellow, as like a Mexican cowboy as any fellow of that kind I have seen on the films. "What happened to you?" I asked; and he told me that all sorts of things had happened to him since six o'clock the previous morning, but he hadn't time to tell the yarn, except that after his escape from the Germans, who were all around him, he got through and borrowed a Tommy's gun and fought all day with our infantry, and liked it.

"It's not the first time I've held a gun in my hand," he

said. "I was in the Spanish-American War and other places. I guess I knocked out a few Boches for you."

One of the American railway teams had their track blown up ahead of them by forward patrols of Germans, and these also tell me that they thought it time to quit, and quitted. But afterwards they formed part of some patrols who volunteered for service with our infantry, and so saw some very hard fighting with out Guards at Gouzeacourt. Among them was a number of New York men.

All these Americans showed a high and splendid spirit, and our men are loud in praise of them. "It was the dog-gonest experience I have ever had," said one of them, "and a mighty close call anyway."

They had some casualties among them, but by good luck only a few.

DECEMBER 4

ALL day yesterday the enemy continued his thrusts against our lines from the St. Quentin Canal by Marcoing southward to the neighbourhood of Gonnelieu and La Vacquerie. His plan of attack was direct and obvious. It was to drive through our lines below Marcoing by way of the small copse to the south-east of the village, and at the same time to break through towards Villers-Pluich and Metz-en-Couture by gaining the high ground of La Vacquerie and its surrounding heights and the St. Quentin Ridge. In this endeavour the enemy has flung in large numbers of men, at least the battalions of six divisions, on that narrow front of attack, not counting the cost, not hesitating to send forward new battalions after those shattered by our fire, never weakening in his pressure against our men, even where he could make no advance, and sending up immediate supports to take advantage of any temporary success.

So at the end of the year we find ourselves engaged in a battle more decisive in its issues, perhaps, than all the fighting of the months which have preceded it, though forced

upon the enemy by all that has gone before—by his weakening man-power after his enormous casualties in Artois and Flanders, by his loss of the Passchendaele Ridge, which has robbed him of his great north wall of defence, so that he may lie open to attack in the plains next year, and by the immediate threat to his line of communication through Cambrai after the smashing of his Hindenburg lines by Sir Julian Byng's army. He seems to be forcing a decisive fight in open country, and how much of political and how much of military significance there is in this it is for other people than myself to estimate. His prisoners tell us that they have been promised peace if they win this battle. Let it go at that.

With whatever inspiration they may have behind them the German troops are fighting with most fierce and stubborn courage, and because of that their losses yesterday and since Friday morning last have been, in our men's judgment—and they ought to know—enormous, as the price of what they have gained. They have not gained very much yet, considering the violence of their efforts, though by sheer repetition of their attacks by masses of men flinging themselves into the face of our fire, they have extended their progress towards Marcoing, won some of the high ground about La Vacquerie, and have a foothold on the St. Quentin Ridge above our country round Metz and Gouzeaucourt. Our men, therefore, are in the midst of a struggle as severe as anything that has faced British troops since the second Battle of Ypres. Since then on this front our enemy has been on the defensive, apart from his furious counter-attacks in the battles of the Somme and the Arras fighting and Flanders, which were for defensive reasons. But now the offensive is with him, and he is forcing the pace and fighting all out. It is ferocious fighting, preceded as usual on the enemy's side by poison gas and supported by heavy artillery. Our men are denying the enemy's advance yard by yard, and if ground is yielded, as in our withdrawal from the salient at Masnières, and yesterday

from Marcoing Copse below the Chapel of the Virgin at the entrance of the town, and from some of the slopes about La Vacquerie, it is only after a butchery of Germans and rear-guard actions which, I suppose, will be counted as among the most bloody episodes of this war.

It is perhaps unnecessary to say that our men realize the high importance of this battle, yet I must say it, because it is in each man's mind, and is the guiding thought which urges these men of ours to the most desperate resistance in places where for a time they have been cut off or outnumbered. The wounded who come back out of that zone of shell-fire and machine-gunning find only one comfort in their state, and that is that the enemy could not break their lines, or if he broke them for a time was thrust back again.

As long as I live I shall never forget those Guards and English county troops whom I met the other morning after our counter-attacks, which drove the enemy out of Gouzeaucourt and back from Gonnelieu. These men had been through machine-gun fire diabolical in its fury. They had lain out all night under heavy shell-fire, and had attacked again in the following morning, and had been wounded, and then had hobbled back to the first-aid dressing-station, and now after getting a bandage round their wounds lay in trucks on the light railway, huddled together in the darkness under tarpaulin and blanket covers which a wind with the edge of a knife in its blast tried to tear away from them. They had seen war at its worst—savage fighting at close quarters, fighting through houses and over broken walls and down in dark cellars, and they had fought cold and fought thirsty, and had been surrounded all night by the awful sounds and sights of such a battlefield. So they did not speak light-hearted things nor breezy things, which those who know not war like to put into the mouths of our men, but gravely and quietly they described the battle and their own share in it, and what was then the peril of the situation. I spoke to them under the cover of those trucks in a strange twilight which was al-

most darkness, so that I could see the faces of only one or two men, and beyond that only blurred shadow faces. But these men's voices rose up from the bottom of the trucks where they lay, like voices speaking out of that shadow world where there is only truth.

One man said: "I didn't care for anything as long as we drove them back," and another said: "We knew we had got to get them back, or they would be all over us, so we let them have it and went through Gouzeaucourt without a check," and another said: "Their machine-gun fire was frightful," and another: "The Germans want to make a big battle of this. There will be some bloody fighting before we're through with it." Then a last voice laughed in a grim way, and said: "I'm out of it now with a hole in my leg."

In another place I sat down by the side of a young gunner who had lost his guns in the first break through. He was one of those who had been given rifles and put into the line with infantry and dismounted cavalry, and American railwaymen and Canadian engineers, and men of the labour battalions. He was only a boy, but he spoke with the gravity of an old man as he leaned forward, looking at his wounded leg in a thoughtful way.

"It's Fritz's turn now," he said. "He's trying to get back on us. We shall have to put up a big fight to stop him."

"Do you think we shall?" I asked. He looked up at me under his steel hat, and said, "We've got to."

And that is the spirit in which our men are fighting—a stern, grim, stubborn spirit, holding on to positions until they become untenable, and sometimes after they have become untenable, so that bodies of them are cut off, as yesterday were some groups on the north side of St. Quentin Canal by Marcoing, fighting to the last so that other troops may fall back in safety. Nobody is able to see these things among the streets of ruined villages, in sunken roads and bits of trench by La Vacquerie and Marcoing

Copse and the country round Gonnelieu. Only the men who come back can tell of them, and many do not come back, and some who come back do not tell much, because these things cannot be put into words by simple men who do not analyse their own emotions, or say more than "it was very hot" in their description of a scene where, perhaps, they were a little group of worn and weary men holding a forlorn hope, with many dead and wounded round them, and the last belt of a machine-gun to hold back swarms of field-grey foes. To-day there is one such post beyond Marcoing, and yesterday a few thin groups of men held out to the last in Marcoing Copse and round La Vacquerie before the enemy came through his dead and wounded in another attacking wave.

Yesterday the enemy delivered at least three big attacks on La Vacquerie, and this was the storm centre of all the battle, and it is certain from what all our men say that the German losses in that neighbourhood were very great, so that the ground is strewn with bodies who fell under our machine-gun and rifle fire. All the German battalions advanced in dense order, without attempt of concealment, so that their ranks withered under our men's steady fire. At 3.15 in the afternoon a new and powerful thrust was made by German storm troops west of Masnières, in the direction of Marcoing, and for a time our line was pierced. But our supporting troops closed up and the gap was stopped, and a quick counter-attack threw back the enemy's line at least part of the way it had come, though they are now on the eastern edge of Marcoing, held at bay by that one brave little outpost, which may have withdrawn by the time I write.

The 166th Brigade of the 55th Division, all Lancashire battalions, countered repeated attacks westwards from Gonnelieu, and our artillery shattered many of the enemy's attempts to assemble and smothered many of his guns with shell-fire, especially in the Banteau Ravine, where he had a

large concentration of batteries, so that many of them were put out of action.

Some of our men who were cut off in the earlier fighting, like those taken prisoner at Gouzeaucourt, have found their way back into our lines after hiding on the enemy's side of the line, and among them are some English lads belonging to a party of forty who were taken prisoner and put into a barbed-wire enclosure beyond the Escaut River and Canal. But our men who found themselves there did not sit down in despair. They waited till dark and then made their escape, and working back towards our lines swam the canal and so got back to their comrades in Marcoing.

Other men have been rescued in our counter-attacks. One of whom I have just heard was a gunner officer with one of our generals who had his headquarters in a quarry near Gouzeaucourt. When the Germans broke through on Friday morning the general and some of his staff had to made a rapid retreat down the road, and were nearly caught. The gunner officer was not so quick, because of a wound in his knee, and fell into the enemy's hands, but they did not trouble to take him back with them when they fled before the Guards.

It is too soon yet to claim any decisive results after all this fighting, but in spite of the enemy's gain of ground yesterday, which may be increased a little to-day, or to-morrow—let us be prepared for that—the anxiety of our defence has lifted perceptibly during the last twelve hours, and men of responsibility are breathing more easily again after hours of suspense and tension, inevitable at such a time when the enemy was launching the full weight of his attack. He has struck his heaviest blows, it seems. At least, the full shock of his first blow, upon which much of his success depended, has been withstood, and our lines have remained firm after a few withdrawals, as at Masnières, and the neighbourhood of Gonnelieu. The menace of anything like a big German victory overbalancing and overwhelming our own dramatic success of November 20, seems to have

passed, and with it the grandiose promises of the German command for the inspiration of their soldiers.

A frightful price has been paid by the enemy for his slight progress, and there is now good reason to believe that whatever strength they decide to bring up it can be resisted in the same way, with here and there, no doubt, some yielding of ground, with orderly withdrawals from positions made too costly to hold against continual waves of attack and great storms of fire, but without any collapse or debacle which might repay the enemy for this last offensive of the year.

His first plan seems to have been well thought out. Against such a salient as we held after our break through the Hindenburg line it had a chance of success. He was cunning in bringing up his troops secretly, as we had done ours, and in holding the hour of his first attack until after our morning patrols had gone the rounds and reported all quiet in his line. But he was disappointed by the utter failure of the northern attack against Bourlon Wood, and by losing very quickly what advantage he had gained on our right flank in the first surprise.

After that he has been held and punished in a dreadful way, and the grim valour of our soldiers, fighting him every yard of the way in this fierce, close, and bloody struggle, where human tragedy and human courage are crowded into small plots of ground, has broken the German assault in its first and most decisive phase. That, at least, is our sober hope and belief, though the fortune of war will decide.

DECEMBER 6

THE Commander-in-Chief has announced this afternoon in his official *communiqué* the news of our withdrawal from part of the ground captured in our advance on November 20, in order to avoid holding the sharp salient made by Bourlon Wood and our line running down east and west of it. This operation has been very secretly done, and was

carried out with the finest courage and discipline by our troops after the plan was decided. It was not an easy or safe thing to do, and its success depended on the enemy's complete ignorance of our intention and the valour of the rear-guards holding on to positions to the last possible moment, ready to fight hard until the main bodies of troops had withdrawn to our present line of defence. Any premature discovery might have led to immediate pressure of the enemy against our forward posts and considerable danger to those falling back behind them. So far from this happening the enemy was thoroughly deceived as to our intentions, and long after the withdrawal had been effected on our left yesterday morning, he put down a heavy bombardment on the abandoned trenches near Mœuvres, and afterwards launched a strong infantry attack on those positions, watched at a distance by our men, who chuckled at this furious advance upon mythical defenders. It seemed a huge joke to our men, whose sense of humour was sharpened by their sense of safety.

The withdrawal began the night before last. It was very cold and still over the battlefields, with a hard frost on the ground and a bright moon shining over its whiteness. But mist floated about the fields, and our men moved silently like shadows in it, and if the enemy saw any movement he did not suspect anything more than the business of relief. It was in the Bourlon Wood area that, as yesterday morning drew on, he first suspected a strange emptiness. He sent his patrols forward, and as they crept into the wood and south of Bourlon village, they must have seen pretty quickly signs of our having packed up and gone. We left nothing behind, and destroyed dug-outs and works which the enemy had built, and we had occupied during the fortnight's adventure.

At midday yesterday small bodies of Germans were seen advancing very cautiously over the rising ground south of Bourlon village, and half an hour later groups of them approached the ruins of the sugar factory, which had once

been their balloon shed. They hesitated here; did not seem to like the look of things; crept round and about; and then, spurring their courage, went inside. Later, after news had been taken back or signalled back, strong forces of the enemy came forward, showing themselves on the sky-line and advancing in open order down the slope. At one o'clock our artillery, which had been very quiet waiting for their targets, opened fire, and swept all this ground with shrapnel, so that all these standing figures fell, some of them killed and wounded, and all of them taking to earth. Our bombardment was maintained, but all through the day up to seven o'clock in the evening groups and scattered bodies of German troops were seen working southwards to get in touch with our new line of defence, which they could not locate. A little while after dusk yesterday about 400 of them were seen on the south side of the Cambrai road, and at nine o'clock our men saw another 300 or so south-east of Bourlon Wood. I hear that two prisoners were captured by our men from these forward patrols, and they said that three battalions of their regiment were all advancing in order to maintain pressure on our rear-guards and get in contact, if possible, with our main line. All through the day hostile aeroplanes flew over our lines trying to observe our new positions, but they could not have discovered what they wanted, for long after our abandonment of Bourlon Wood and other positions around it, the enemy heavily shelled these places. During the afternoon considerable bodies of men seemed to be assembling in the centre of our line for an asault in mass, but our guns dealt with them and shattered them where they were, under cover of a sunken road. This morning the enemy still seemed bewildered as to our exact positions and intentions.

On our right wing yesterday there was violent fighting again around La Vacquerie, but the enemy's new thrust in that direction was repulsed after much killing of his men, and we pressed him back from some of the ground he had gained in the earlier fighting.

The events between November 20 and our strategical withdrawal from Bourlon Wood to the present line form one of the most thrilling and extraordinary episodes in the history of this war. It began when Sir Julian Byng's audacious and cunning plan of attack without preliminary bombardment and with large numbers of Tanks stupefied the enemy and opened a wide breach in the Hindenburg line through which our infantry and cavalry passed out into the open country round Cambrai, and did amazing things which have not yet all been told—as, for instance, the story of the German prisoners that some of our troopers actually rode into Cambrai itself on that first night of victory.

Ten thousand prisoners were taken by us, and it is believed that, but for certain elements of bad luck, Cambrai might have been ours, though it was not within our expectations. The enemy was quick in hurling up guns and reinforcements and developed violent counter-attacks. In all those he lost prodigiously in men, and the number of his casualties must have been extravagantly high, even according to accounts given by his own prisoners. After all this fighting and one day of vicissitudes, during which the enemy had the luck to get through a weak place in our advanced lines and overrun some of the country we had gained, we had withdrawn to strong positions on ground seized from the enemy in a cheap and easy way. Here we remain secure, with good observation and strong lines behind us.

DECEMBER 7

WE are now back in strong defensive positions south of Bourlon Wood and west of Gonnelieu and Villers-Guislan, chosen when we were forced to withdraw, and with Hindenburg lines, old Hindenburg front and support lines behind us. I have already given yesterday some details of the way in which our retirement was achieved with fine skill and discipline by our covering troops in the neighbourhood of Bourlon Wood. It is a proof of the wonderful secrecy

with which these plans were carried out that there was only one casualty in Bourlon Wood during the time our men were getting away. They were glad to get away. For big strategical reasons we may regret that we could not get hold of the black forest on high ground which dominates the northern approaches to Cambrai, and for which our men fought with fine valour, so that always those dim glades will be haunted by heroic memories of young Yorkshire lads who fought and died there, and of the pilots and crews of Tanks who came crashing through the undergrowth, rooting out nests of German machine-gunners and trenches full of infantry dug behind barricades of fallen trunks. If we had succeeded in widening our hold on all the high ground around the forest, and getting beyond the village of Fontaine-Notre-Dame, Cambrai would have been a costly possession for the enemy, and we might have gained the town as a crowning prize of the year's fighting. That was not to be. It was not within the expectations of our first plan of attack on November 20, though the success of that day raised high hopes in some minds.

That we have abandoned Bourlon Wood will be a disappointment to map-makers, who find it good to draw new lines of our advance. To our men who had to hold it, the withdrawal was a relief from a place of horror. When I watched the shelling of that forest I shuddered in spirit at the sinister aspect of it, that big black belt of trees on the ridge above Graincourt and Anneux, and all the country beyond Anneux, so grim, so still, so silent. There was never sign of life within it. The trees seemed more motionless than those of other woods, and blacker below the clouds or blue sky. It was such a forest where, in old days, lonely knights would have crossed themselves as they went through, the rider expecting to meet witch-women and evil creatures. Our knights and men-at-arms met things as bad as that. The enemy flung his gas shells into the forest, soaked all its glades and undergrowth with poison gas, so that every bush reeked with it, and all the sodden

leaves of autumn fall so that moisture on tree-trunks and every bead of dew or rain on branches and twigs was a drop of poison, and floating mists were heavy with it. In a place that is thoroughly gassed men are compelled to work and fight and sleep in their gas-masks; they dare not take them off to drink or eat. When our men left Bourlon Wood there was enough poison in the wood to last for three or four days. On that Tuesday night last, when our men stole away in good order and in utter silence, they were wearing their gas-masks as usual under their steel hats, so that as moonlight filtered through the tracery of the branches and slanted through the tall, black pillars of the quiet trees, our soldiers must have looked horribly like men bewitched into foul forms by spirits from this wood. They broke the evil spell when outside this forest of Bourlon. They pulled off their masks—these white-faced, weary fellows of ours—and breathed freely again. The enemy shelled the wood very heavily again on Wednesday morning, flung more gas into it, so that wreaths of white vapour curled about those black trunks, but our men watched all that from a distance, and said: "Fritz can go on with that as long as he likes."

Along other parts of our line of withdrawal, round Graincourt and Anneux and Cantaing, and round the peninsula made by the bend of the canal by Marcoing, some hint must have been given to the enemy of our intentions, because of explosions caused by the blowing up of his dug-outs and tunnels, and the bridges and locks, by small parties of men who stayed on to the last moment and then touched off the fuses. Fires rose, making the night-sky ruddy for miles around, and these loud concussions of sound shaking the earth must have warned the enemy that we were preparing for a move. But the strength of our outpost line and the activity of our rear-guards, who fought his patrols as they pushed out and killed or scattered them, kept him perplexed and anxious, and afterwards, when he sent larger forces forward, waves of storm

troops advancing in the open, many of them were destroyed by our artillery.

All through Tuesday night out batteries were moving back to their new positions in that grey moonlit shadow-world of the battlefield beyond the ruins of Havrincourt and the Flesquières Ridge, and the long winding trail of the Hindenburg line. They were the guns which had been brought up secretly a fortnight before for Sir Julian Byng's surprise attack, and had galloped forward with their limbers after the great break through, and then in those far positions perilously near the enemy's lines, had broken up massed counter-attacks, and on that Friday morning when the enemy came through our lines on the right, had saved the situation by smashing back the long, dense streams of men who tried to break our northern lines in the salient. Among them were guns which had been withdrawn hastily after rapid firing, when on that same Friday morning large bodies of field-grey men swarmed suddenly very close to them, and one battery was there, as I shall tell later in a strange narrative of heroic defence, which maintained fire for an hour and a half several hundreds of yards in advance of any infantry, utterly isolated, but sweeping the enemy's lines as they advanced from Crèvecœur and keeping back their battalions by great slaughter. These guns were in their new positions by the coming of dawn, and all next day they found many human targets, so that the enemy's progress towards our outpost line was marked by lines of dead. Yesterday afternoon he was still in doubt as to our real line of defence, and still his patrols were being resisted so strongly by our outposts that he had to send up reinforcements of infantry to press back these brave little groups of men.

At 3.30 in the afternoon these men, forming a reconnaissance in force, advanced upon Orival Wood, which is a small copse south-east of Graincourt. Our guns sighted them, and opened fire with such intensity, after getting the range, that a rough estimate numbers the German dead at

2000 in that attempt. In the same way, three German battalions, advancing to attack from the direction of Graincourt, were utterly shattered and dispersed. Round about the village of Anneux, which we abandoned at the same time as Bourlon Wood, the enemy was so ignorant of our departure that he put a violent storm of fire into this place, and then attacked it with a considerable force of infantry, as though it were fully garrisoned, though not a man or boy remained among its ruins.

VII

The Triumph of the Tanks

December 7

In all this recent fighting—not only when our troops swarmed through the Hindenburg lines and out into the open country towards Cambrai, but during the last few days when the enemy has tried to come back at us with tremendous blows—the strange grey forms of the Tanks have been moving over the open fields and through the ruins of villages, and in outposts of our line where the sweep of fire from their flanks has kept the enemy at bay or chased him back. I saw them on the first morning of our break through up by Villers-Pluich and Flesquières—queer, low-squatting things moving slowly in the creeping mists, no more visible than shadows in that twilight of the early day—and afterwards I saw them below Havrincourt on the way to Graincourt and Bourlon Wood on a day of battle, many of them crawling about the battlefield or resting under cover like herds of prehistoric animals. A few of them, hit by shell-fire, or broken down after long travels over the bad ways, lie about the slopes and ridges of these battlegrounds, as a few of them lie still, rusting and rotting—poor, broken skeletons—on the old battlefields of the Somme, the relics of that day of great adventure on September 15 last year when the secret of the Tanks was first revealed, and our men

went laughing behind them into battle—some of them, perhaps, believing that they had only to go on walking behind Tanks to get the enemy out of France and Belgium.

That first joyous hope was quickly checked. It was obvious that the Tanks were vulnerable, and that in bad, wet ground like that in Flanders they were apt to get bogged at the wrong time, and that there were not enough of them to kill the deadly menace of machine-gun fire, so that infantry had no magic shield to save them from it. There was not enough of them, that was one trouble. I remember more than a year ago sitting at the mess table with some Scottish officers—the Gordons—and one of them said, "If we had hundreds of Tanks we could finish the war. A dozen or two are no good. A score or two are no good. We want hundreds to smash down the German wire, to stamp out their machine-guns, and walk through their strong points." Some of his comrades laughed at him as a wild enthusiast on Tanks, and elsewhere there was for a time a sense of disappointment in the achievements of these things.

They had bad luck. Five times out of six the ground was very difficult for them. Here and there, as in the fighting on the Scarpe after Arras, and even up in Flanders in the worst of weather, they did wonderful things, attacking and destroying blockhouses, routing out machine-gun nests, saving the lives of the infantry, but more of their bodies lay about the battlefields, and they were never in numbers enough to do the big thing which they seemed to promise on that first day of revelation. Now, in this battle round Cambrai they did the big thing, for on that day of November 20 it was their number and the skill and courage of their crews that made the gaps through the German wire and opened the way across the Hindenburg lines for infantry and cavalry, and afterwards routed out German machine-gunners who still defended their positions. Ever since that day of surprise they have been fighting—in the attacks on Bourlon Wood and Bourlon

village and Fontaine-Notre-Dame, and in the counter-attacks against Gouzeaucourt and Gonnelieu which followed the enemy's terrific onslaught to retake his lost ground.

I have told some of the adventures of the Tank crews, but there are others to tell, and worth the telling, because these men have shown a daring and a courage and endurance which is more marvellous the more one knows of their difficulties and their dangers and their utter exhaustion of body when only their spirit was unbeaten. After the third day of battle I saw some of them coming home, and they had been in action for many hours of those days before they crawled back to this lair, where the dark forms of their machines looked very beast-like among their camp-fires, which flickered with a ruddy glare on their mud-cased flanks, so that it seemed a nightmare to me, with the flash of shell-fire etching the outlines of the trees about them. One Tank was in action continuously, driving and fighting, for sixty-four hours—and when one knows, as I know, what a frightful physical strain it is on the crew, boxed up in that narrow space, jammed up against their engine, deafened by the noise of their own gun-fire, shaken and banged over rough ground, and surrounded by hostile troops and guns, it seems astounding that men could endure this so long.

One young officer of the Tanks, one of those second-lieutenants of ours who have done so many heroic things in this war, was 400 yards ahead of the infantry when he reached the German trenches, and for an hour and a half after reaching that position his Tank was lashed by machine-gun fire so that one gunner was seriously wounded, and it was difficult to work the port-gun owing to splinters. At half-past ten that morning the Tank was hit direct by a field-gun shell from a battery near Flesquières, which smashed up some of the machinery and put it out of action. But the Tank pilot and his crew were not put out of action. They got out of the disabled machine, dismounted their Lewis guns, and brought them into action from an old Ger-

man communication trench, firing on the enemy who were still holding the village of Flesquières.

Other Tanks came up to the attack under fire of a field-gun worked, as we know now, by a German major, and the second-lieutenant of the disabled Tank directed them to a nest of machine-guns which were holding up our Seaforths. Afterwards he climbed on to the back of his own Tank so as to get a better field of fire for his Lewis gun. His crew remained in action with him, and when all their guns had become red-hot and jammed, and all their ammunition was exhausted, their officer withdrew them about twenty yards further back where the Scots were holding their line at the time, and this young pilot of Tanks took over the command of a company of these men as their captain was killed soon after his arrival, and remained with them until relieved by another officer. That episode reveals the high quality of courage of the young men who take our Tanks into action, but every day for a fortnight has been notable in the history of the Tanks for acts of gallant and good service.

In the attack on Graincourt village several Tanks were checked by the direct fire of two light field-guns which the enemy had brought forward, while the infantry were held up in the face of deadly machine-gun fire from the streets of Graincourt. Two Tanks worked round the village on each side, stamped out the machine-guns, and captured the field-guns so that the infantry could advance and take possession of the place.

In the attacks on Bourlon Wood the Tanks advanced ahead of the infantry, destroying the enemy's machine-gun emplacements on the outskirts of Bourlon village, and afterwards, when part of this wood had been lost owing to the enemy's violent counter-attacks, they went inside the forest, fighting large bodies of German troops who tried to put them out of action by rifle and machine-gun fire. Many of these men were killed by the Tanks, who remained in the forest for four hours until darkness closed in upon them.

It was a squadron of six Tanks that led the way into

Anneux after a cavalry reconnaissance, and, after a long fight with enemy machine-gunners hidden in the northern edge of the village, cleared the way for the infantry. Many times during these actions the Tank pilots and crews had to get out under heavy fire to get their bearings, or to get going after being ditched, and more than one pilot and man went on driving and fighting after they had been wounded. In the counter-attacks of the last few days the Tanks advanced upon the enemy without any advantage of surprise, and under the fire of field-guns laid against them at short range, and in these actions they have again proved their quality as fighting engines and fighting men.

They are a little sensitive, these young men, to the comic descriptions we used to give of them when they were first seen, and when our words had to camouflage their real shape and structure. "Look here," said one of their officers; "don't go calling the Tanks obscene monsters or ichthyosauri or pre-historic toads. It seems to make a joke of what, after all, is no joke."

And I believe the commander of the Tanks Corps is anxious that it should be known that in his order of the day before battle he did not ask in a literal way that every Tank should do its damnedest—that was a breezy interpretation of his words—but, rather, pointed out more solemnly the greatness and honour of the task that lay ahead of them.

Let us take the Tanks seriously, for inside their steel walls are the bodies and souls of men who are going out into battle with no light-heartedness, for it is a grim and deadly business, but with ideals of duty and endeavour which lead them to stern and terrible adventures, to enormous fatigues of body and spirit, and to many ugly places where, unless they have luck, they may be ditched for ever.

VIII

The Heroes of the Twenty-Ninth Division

December 8

In shreds and patches, with things I have seen and things I have heard, I have tried from day to day to give something like a clear narrative of a thrilling chapter of history following the German assault on our lines on November 30, ten days after Sir Julian Byng's victory. There is still much to tell, and still here and there things that are obscure, because no one man and no one group of men knows exactly everything that happened during the hours when the Germans were inside our advanced lines, and small bodies of British soldiers were fighting separate and isolated actions, and other companies, led by brigadier-generals, regimental officers, or any one who had at that moment the gift of leadership and a passion of courage did acts of surpassing gallantry to check the enemy's advance and save us from disaster. I suppose all those adventures will never be told, but every day I hear more of them. I hear them in strange places, as, not many hours ago, when, in the tumult of war's traffic close to the lines, a friend of mine got off his horse and told me how he had gone into action on the afternoon, broke through the Germans with a little body of cavalry, who galloped ten miles and then pushed patrols to Villers-Guislan, which was in the hands of the enemy. As they went over the ridge the enemy saw them and put shrapnel over them, but the leading patrol went on until it came under close machine-gun fire, and a very gallant officer fell off his horse with a bullet through his badge, and other men fell.

"They were 'grass cutting,'" said one of these officers, speaking of German machine-gunners, "and their shooting was fine." This patrol of cavalry went on, and got their

hotchkiss guns into action against 800 of the enemy, who debouched from the sunken road.

"They thought the whole British Army was on them," said the cavalry officer, "but there were only thirty of us, and we laughed when we saw 'em do a bunk, leaving some of their dead behind."

While I was listening to this tale guns were firing over the ridge ahead of us, and a German aeroplane was hovering above watching our movement of men and horses, and "Archies" were shooting hard, and at the same time, not far away, a band was playing "The Wearin' o' the Green," and close to me an Indian soldier was chaunting the "Koran" to a number of other soldiers of his race squatting around him. It is all like a fantastic nightmare this war of ours, but in such scenes as this one hears the truth of great realities, straight simple stories of battle and of heroic things in the midst of tragedy and sometimes of men's weakness.

Here in this message I will write more fully than I have done yet of the things that happened on November 30, and the days that followed, as I have gathered them, not only in a haphazard way, but from sources which admit of no doubt or error in their details. To know what happened, first one must understand that the right wing of our Cambrai salient was held very thinly by battalions of the 55th Division who had mostly done some hard fighting already. I have given an account of what took place on the extreme right, and it helps to explain things elsewhere. The night before November 30 the Germans fired a large number of poison-gas shells into our villages of Ronssoy and Lempire and their neighbourhood, and officers reported that the "enemy is making faces at us." Then at dawn they put a violent bombardment on to the front lines. They were lines held to a certain extent by blocks of men at intervals, with gaps between, and the enemy, advancing suddenly in waves, penetrated simultaneously at several points on a

sector of front where many were overwhelmed and surrounded.

But other bodies of our men, Lancashire men of the 55th Division, including the King's Liverpools and the Liverpool Scottish, were refusing ground to the enemy, and put up a grim fight all day, which saved our extreme right from being turned. One unit fell back in good order to three posts in its rear, and another unit held on to two positions west and south of Vendhuille. From one of these they counter-attacked the enemy's left, and beat it back by furious fighting, and although they had set out of a narrow quarry, into which the enemy flung his shells, they defended the posts behind, and would not let the enemy pass all that day or all the next. Meanwhile the enemy had forced in the centre of our line, and was advancing on Villers-Guislan and Gouzeaucourt. But the gallant King's Liverpools stopped him abruptly south of Villers-Guislan by stubborn fighting round Vaucelette Farm and the beet factory on the road from Peizières. They met the enemy in the open with rifle-fire and bayonets, flung him back from the beetroot factory each time he tried to advance, and balked his desperate efforts to get the farm. So was our right saved by these men.

The centre had for a time been bent in, and exciting things were happening up by Villers-Guislan and Gouzeaucourt, which had seemed to us so secure and remote from front-line perils until breakfast-time on that black Friday. Near Villers-Guislan a general had his headquarters. He had gone there after a visit to some other headquarters further south, and he was sleeping in his pyjamas when suddenly he was startled by the noise of rifle shots and machine-gunning. He rushed out and saw the enemy advancing close, with open country before them. The general shouted to his orderlies and cooks and signallers, and other groups of men who were near his quarters. Collecting a small party of them who were able to seize their rifles, and still in pyjamas, he led them out to hold up the enemy's

outposts. Every man except himself was killed, but he rallied more men, seventy of them, including a number of American railwaymen, and dragged up one field-gun, which he got into action at close range and fired with such deadly effect that the enemy retreated 1000 yards before getting up supports.

At Gouzeaucourt similar scenes were taking place. I have described some of them before, but I have now fuller knowledge of what happened. A general and his staff—of the 29th Division—were in the headquarters in a quarry, up the slope to the west of the village. In the village itself was a dressing-station among the ruins, with pioneers, labour parties, and other odd units. Outside the village were American and Canadian railway men, with their engines and truck trains bringing up rations. Early in the morning the enemy began shelling round the quarry, and the gunner-general was badly hit in the knee. Thirty big shells fell very close, and at 8.45 rifle-fire was suddenly heard at close range from Villers-Guislan. A staff-officer went up the steps of the dug-out in the quarry and came down to report to the general that the Germans were advancing over the ridge. The general was perfectly calm, as all who know this gallant and knightly man may well imagine. From among signallers, runners, and servants he collected a number of men who could use their rifles, and sent them up to the ridge as a covering party, then ordered the rest of the personnel, including dispatch riders, to retire to Gouzeaucourt. The Germans were quite close to his headquarters now, but, as his officers tell me, he showed no kind of hurry as far as his own safety was involved, and at last walked very quietly with his A.D.C. and other officers out of the quarry. They had to run the gauntlet of a 5.9 barrage and rifle fire at 400 yards, but the general walked with his head erect, and with his usual quiet dignity. They had to go down the slope and up again to Gouzeaucourt, and at the bottom of the slope was a railway engine and trucks, halted on the level-crossing. This caused delay, and

held up the dispatch-riders so that several of them were killed, but the general and his staff passed through safely when the engine was shunted back, and afterwards got away from Gouzeaucourt before the enemy came in.

I have described the scene round the dressing-station when the staff was awakened by shots, and one of them ran from his bath with a towel round his body, but the end of the story has not yet been told. When the Germans came in they were not in great numbers for some time, and took no violent measures against their prisoners. The hospital staff was allowed to go on working, a few wounded being brought to them, and a sentry was put over the entrance to their dug-outs. He seemed a nice fellow, that young Fritz who walked up and down with fixed bayonet, so nice that the doctors felt sorry for him on such a cold morning, and sent up word to say they would be glad to give him a cup of tea, fresh made and piping hot. So there was no sentry on the door, and one by one the orderlies and others went through that door and away to liberty again, if they had the luck to dodge the German riflemen among the ruins.

At this time three visitors came to Gouzeaucourt and were surprised by what they found—in fact, they had been surprised for some time past. They were three R.A.M.C. men off duty, who had borrowed a car and set off as tourists to see the battle-fields. They got as far as Graincourt when they heard bullets whistling about them. "Very careless," they thought. "Our Tommies should really not shoot so wildly all over the place." "Silly asses!" they said, when one of them was hit through the hat. They turned the car about and came to Gouzeaucourt, and on the road were amazed to see a German gunner with a light field-gun. The driver was not an R.A.M.C. man, but he had no weapon of offence except his motor-car, so he ran over the enemy and hurt him badly. The first impulse of these R.A.M.C. men was to render first aid, but the bullets whizzing past their heads checked philanthropy, and they drove away at a pace exceeding the speed limit. That story has an ele-

ment of comedy in it, but there is only tragedy and heroism in what I have now to tell—the heroism of those men of the glorious 29th Division who defended Masnières and Marcoing until many of them were dead and wounded, and who, by very great valour and self-sacrifice in dreadful hours, stopped by their own bodies the full tide of the German onrush. The 86th Brigade of the 29th Division were then holding Masnières, with the Middlesex Regiment on the right and the Lancashire Fusiliers on the left. In support at the sugar factory, east of the village, were the Royal Fusiliers, and the Guernsey Light Infantry were in the village itself as supporting troops. The 87th Brigade of this Division were holding the Cambrai road from the Château Talmas to the north of Marcoing, with the Inniskillings on the right, the Border Regiment on the left, and the South Wales Borderers in support. The King's Own Scottish Borderers and the 88th Brigade were in divisional reserve in Marcoing.

At five o'clock on the morning of November 30 a gunner officer reported that his batteries had been heavily shelled during the night, and all the troops were ordered to be on the alert, and the Royal Fusiliers and Guernsey Light Infantry stood to at alarm posts and in the catacombs below Masnières. The enemy shelled our lines, and at eight o'clock, in spite of the mist, observers saw his men moving at Crèvecœur. It was not till forty minutes afterwards that the enemy were reported advancing, and some of our men falling back under their pressure of overwhelming numbers, so that their wave of field-grey men were flowing up close to Masnières and Marcoing. Two companies of the Guernseys were sent across the canal to make a defensive flank at Les Rues Vertes, the southern suburb of Masnières, while the 1st Lancashire Fusiliers and the 16th Middlesex attacked. It was when the enemy had already thrust into these streets that a certain staff captain came to lead the defence, with such a flame of passion in him that he fired all the men in his company. He is not a very

young man, like so many officers, but of middle age, and he has a little daughter at home hurt by German bombs, so that this memory does not make him like his enemy. He happened to be at the headquarters south of Marcoing that morning, and when he went up to a dump saw Germans standing guard over it. He killed one of these men with a blow from his walking-stick, and put the others to flight. Then, seeing the situation, he collected his servants, signallers and runners, and, followed by two companies of Guernsey Light Infantry, chased the enemy out of Les Rues Vertes, where many were killed in house-to-house fighting. Masnières was then all clear of the enemy except for a machine-gun which was causing casualties among our men. The staff captain had already had four orderlies killed beside him, but now, with another, he rushed the gun. The fifth orderly was also killed, but with a revolver in each hand the officer shot the crew of eight Germans. Then he collected more men as new outposts of the enemy forced their way into Les Rues Vertes, and again he cleared the village of them after fierce fighting. By this time the staff captain had been wounded in the leg, but he remained on duty till the following morning, when he moved into Marcoing. By his heroic conduct this officer saved a whole brigade, if not a division.

Meanwhile the 1st Lancashire Fusiliers and 16th Middlesex were beating back heavy attacks, three times repeated, between Rumilly and the Cambrai road, and the enemy was never able to come nearer than 100 yards, and was repulsed with great slaughter by machine-gun, trench-mortar, and rifle-fire. In a sunken road south of Masnières where the enemy kept assembling, there was a massacre of Germans under trench-mortar fire commanded by an officer who fired some 300 shells into that ditch. Many of them had been killed earlier in the morning in that neighbourhood south of Masnières by an officer of artillery and his gunners, who found themselves isolated and in advance of our infantry, with the enemy advancing in waves over the ridge of Crève-

cœur. For an hour and a half he kept his guns in action, firing at close range with open sights on the German storm troops, on the cavalry crossing over the canal bridges in column of route, and on all German traffic of assault, so that his gunners never had such targets and inflicted frightful casualties. But they could not stop the tide of men and horses and guns, and at last, when the foremost waves were close upon him, the officer ordered his men—fifty of them were casualties—to retire with their breach-locks and abandon the guns.

In Masnières and Marcoing dusk crept down the broken streets, but still the enemy attacked. At four o'clock he attacked Masnières on three sides, but was beaten off. At ten minutes past five he made another effort against Les Rues Vertes, but was again repulsed with slaughter. Then he opened a terrible bombardment from three sides, and it was clear to the officer commanding these men at Masnières that he could hardly hold out twenty-four hours, owing to the exhaustion and casualties of his men, who were hungry and tired, but with no thought of surrender.

The officer commanding the trench-mortars had exhausted all his ammunition and was severely wounded, and at this time the German 77's were firing from three sides and enfilading our men severely. The trench-mortars were destroyed, and an officer led a party of infantry to beat off another attack on Les Rues Vertes, while orders were issued for all the men to hold on at all costs. They held.

Not an inch of ground had been lost by the heroic battalions of Guernseys, Middlesex men, and Lancashire Fusiliers when night came on. By this time they had received more ammunition from a brigade transport officer, who arrived with pack-mules in Masnières after a perilous journey under fire.

That night the 16th Middlesex, the old "Die-hards," who had fought all through the day, repelling attack after attack as the enemy tried to force the passage of the canal, had only weak forces left, and still expected fresh assaults

upon them as soon as the sky should lighten for another dawn.

A colonel was the hero of the defence. In the morning, with the staff of his battalion headquarters, those orderlies and signallers who went into the fighting-line that day in any part of the field, he held the lock over the canal south of the sugar factory at Masnières—which the enemy tried to force by bloody fighting—until he was relieved by the Royal Fusiliers, and then directed the defence of his battalion of Middlesex with a courage that his officers and men cannot praise too much. A bullet struck him in the right eye, and wounded him so badly that for a time he was blind in both eyes, with a bandage over them. But this officer, the brother of Forbes-Robertson, who once played in *The Light that Failed,* did not relinquish his command nor show any dimming of that spirit which was like a light among his men. He told an orderly to lead him by the hand to the front line held by his men, and so guided he found his way to them, and spoke fine thrilling words to them, so that they were greatly encouraged to fight on. Then he got into touch with the men of the Hampshire Regiment and South Wales Borderers, who were on his right, and told them that his men were still holding their line so that the situation might yet be saved. The night passed, and at 7.15 next morning there was a heavy bombardment, followed by an attack in eight waves by German infantry on the north side of the canal, where they drove in the outpost established in Mon Plaisir Farm, 700 yards from the canal lock below the sugar factory, and they were beaten back elsewhere with severe losses.

In the sugar factory were four of our machine-guns, and as the dense lines of Germans tried to force the passage of the canal to Les Rues Vertes they were swept by the fire of these weapons, and 500 of them were drowned at this point in the canal. All day long the German Red Cross were busy in this neighbourhood rescuing their wounded. . . . At ten o'clock the enemy were reported advancing in

rushes in the neighbourhood of Mon Plaisir, and at that time two German areoplanes flew over Masnières and dropped red lights, and there followed an intense bombardment for an hour and a quarter, so that from the roof of the château where the general stood nothing could be seen but red dust, and all the town was wrecked.

The general left the château when the enemy was on the canal bridge and had rushed the streets of Les Rues Vertes. He went along the canal bank, and found that for the first time the men were shaken, and were firing wildly without full effect. He spoke to them in words used by an American general long ago in history: "Do not fire until you see the whites of your enemy's eyes."

The men remained calm, and a platoon were sent to hold the lock bridge. An officer organized a bridgehead defence, and, with his orderly and six men, beat back the enemy, taking five of them prisoners on our side of the canal. This officer fired all his revolver ammunition, and then took a German rifle and went after the enemy. All round this bridgehead there was savage fighting by bombing parties, and in the *mêlée* it was difficult to distinguish friend from foe, but eighty prisoners were captured among 300 who attacked with machine-guns.

South of Les Rues Vertes other bodies of our troops, including the South Wales Borderers and King's Own Scottish Borderers, held the gap on the right, and fought very fiercely to clear the enemy out of the sunken roads running south of Masnières and Marcoing, and to hold up the hostile tide which was flowing westwards.

At 7.30 on the night of December 1, a staff officer made his way into Masnières, and arranged the details for a withdrawal from that town, which was held by exhausted, famished men, with many wounded in cellars, and groups of prisoners brought in during the day. Every cellar was searched, and the prisoners voluntarily helped to carry the wounded out on doors and boards, so that not one was left behind. All papers were destroyed, and all the ammuni-

tion which could not be carried away was destroyed. Nothing of any value to the enemy remained, and all this was done without sound, in dead silence. The bridgehead defences were withdrawn last, and Masnières was left so quietly that for many hours next day the enemy bombarded it, believing our troops to be still there. On December 3 the enemy's pressure increased round Marcoing, and there was heavy fighting in the peninsula in the northern bend of the canal, and south of that. Then our men left Marcoing, and the last man in the town was a brigadier, who went through its deserted streets at night and did not meet a single living man, though many dead. An officer of the Headquarters Staff remained at the bridgehead and blew it up, and on Tuesday, December 4, our organized retirement was made to our present line of defence.

Our withdrawal on the left by Mœuvres and the line coming down from Bourlon Wood to the Canal du Nord was made after a gallant bit of work by our men of the 2nd Division in this difficult part of the line, under constant fire, when they actually pushed forward their line closer to Bourlon village, so denying the enemy observation of our ground south and south-east. In doing so they came across two 3-inch guns and two field-guns abandoned by the enemy after his repulse on November 30, and these were blown up by our men. On the canal bank we had a forward post from which we could enfilade the enemy in Bourlon village with machine-gun fire, and on the day of his big attack, which failed so disastrously for him on this northern side of the salient, even our wounded men begged to stay in order not to miss their share in repulsing the enemy. They were paying him back for many things suffered. In those Hindenburg lines near Mœuvres our men had suffered under fierce shell-fire, and on the canal bank they had been bombed and trench-mortared, and on the left of Mœuvres and in and out of the village there had been long and bloody fighting. Before the organized withdrawal from this battle-ground the dug-outs with which

the ground was honey-combed were blown up, and all material was removed. It was a point of honour with each man to bring away as much as he could carry, and they staggered back in the darkness under monstrous voluntary loads. Since then, on our new line of defence, there have been very few casualties, and there is at least this compensation for the loss of some ground—that it means a great saving of life, and gives us strong defensive positions which the enemy can only attack at high cost to himself.

PART II

THE APPROACHING MENACE

I

The Peace of the Snow

January 8, 1918

There is a blizzard of snow on the Western Front, and the melting ice of yesterday has hardened again and is covered deep. It is as heavy a snowstorm as I have seen since the winter of 1914 in France, and there is a wild wind, which comes moaning and whining across the fields with a ghostly plaint, crying round the gables of old houses and wailing through the bare trees, which are all white again. It is sweeping the surface of the snow-fields with invisible brooms as though white witches were dancing there and raising a whirl of flakes in their mad mazurka. Every now and then the wind flings itself with a shriek against the doors of the barns or the warped windows of one old château I know, where a number of officers are as snow-bound as if they were in winter quarters on the Island of Kerguelen, and all the bolts are rattled as though some angry spirit wanted to come in where they sit round a log fire, saying "What a life!" after long intervals of silence and unutterable thoughts. Outside the snow has drifted across the roads, and a flurry of flakes is following the dispatch-riders, who must get somehow between one head-quarters and another. I met one on the road this morning, and he looked like Father-Christmas in war time, with

an ermine mantle on his back and a white crown on his head, and his dispatch-bag plastered with snow, and every spoke of his motor-cycle thick with it. A lonely camp he passed was like a scene in Northern China, or what I should imagine it to be, and among the snow-covered sheds a number of Chinese labourers—who, by the oddest freak of fate, have come to the edge of this Western war—were standing about snow-clad above their overalls and blankets, smiling in their sphinx-like way into the face of the blizzard. Lorry columns went ploughing through the snowdrifts to the ration dumps, and soldiers became snow-sweepers to clear the way of the roads, and liked their job so that they were whistling to the tune of the wind which whipped the blood to their cheeks.

There is not much war in progress except in the air, where on both sides planes are out trying to get photographs of the enemy's lines, because, though the snow hides some things, it tells many secrets where it has melted above the dug-outs, and where tracks of feet go up to certain places, and where guns have been hidden by artful camouflage. So up in the air war goes on, where our flying fellows find it hard to get the touch of their machine-guns because an ungloved hand is like a block of ice, but where every day they challenge the enemy to single combat or squadron encounters, and lately have had the luck to drive many of them down. Broken aeroplanes look like dead blackbirds on the snow-fields as I saw them a year ago on the Somme battlefields, before the German retreat.

On the ground war has called a truce because of the snow, except for bursts of artillery fire on both sides, as a demonstration of the mighty power of destruction which is waiting there on our side and theirs for the call to battle when the spring comes. But this new fall of snow means a longer respite. Nature has arranged an armistice in her white palace of peace, and the fighting men are standing to and waiting with their rifles ready, but inactive. For a time the war seems to have passed out of the hands of the

armies into those of the statesmen, and powers are at work greater than high explosives, if ideas and the psychology of nations and the stress of peoples have any force in the decisions of destiny. Out here the armies in the field are waiting for those decisions which one way or the other will hold the fate of thousands of men. The newspapers that come out to the dug-outs and the billets, and the wireless that gives the first clue of what is being said by our statesmen and the enemy's, provide the conversation which goes on during the day and night wherever two soldiers have a chance to talk, or the thoughts that go round and round the men's heads when they are alone and silent.

The armies never say a word outside those private conversations in holes in the ground and in draughty barns, where they sleep on straw, or in the billets behind the lines. They are as silent as death in the great world-discussion of war aims and peace terms, although it is their lives which hang in the balance and their courage which will win whatever is won. They are without expression but not without interest in this crisis of thought which has come out of the agonies of great peoples and great armies, and so, while there is a quiet time in the snow, the souls of many thousands of men are filled with the drama of the headlines in the papers of the day before yesterday, and in their hearts is the question: "What shall we read the day after to-morrow?"

Is it not natural that they should be more eager for news than the people who get their papers at the breakfast tables at home? For the headlines that will be printed during the next few weeks will tell the men what battles must be fought by them, when the snow melts and the thaw dries, or what has been won or what lost by all they —these fighting men of ours—have done and suffered.

JANUARY 10

In spite of a thaw last night, after another heavy blizzard, we are still deep in snow on this Western Front, and

all the battle-fields are under a white shroud, so that their familiar landmarks, their rags and tatters of ruin, their old trenches, and new wire, their unexploded shells, and all their shell-craters, are covered up and made smooth as a bed of down. They are strangely and uncannily quiet in most part of the line, for the hush of the snow seems to have fallen on the war, and even the guns are silent in most sectors, because there is poor visibility for observation posts or aeroplanes through the whirl of flakes.

This spell of silence was broken two mornings ago, east of Bullecourt, by the sudden hostile attack reported by the Commander-in-Chief, which was something more than a raid, though not on a big scale. The enemy bombarded our trenches before the light of day with high explosives and gas, and at about half-past six three parties of Bavarians, who had been lying out in No Man's Land, advanced on our front line, from which some of our men no doubt had been withdrawn from the immediate area of shell-fire, which came as a creeping barrage before the attack. Two of the enemy parties were carrying *flammenwerfer,* those flame-jet machines which take two men to work and send out a thirty-foot flame as fierce as a bunsen burner—a long scarlet tongue of fire which licks up the life of a man at one touch. It is a terrifying thing to men who see it for the first time or who have not been trained how to avoid its menace, but most of our men have seen demonstrations of it and know how to deal with it. In this case our front line near Bullecourt was for a time entered, and the Bavarians used our trench as cover from the white nakedness of No Man's Land. An immediate counter-attack killed some of them, but the others stayed on until the middle of the morning. At half-past eleven it was snowing hard, and the footsteps of the men who had come across No Man's Land were filled up and blotted out. Some red splodges in front of our wire were made white again. Through the heavy snowflakes our second counter-attack was delivered, and this time the Bavarians were turned out

of the ground in which they had been unwelcome visitors. Nearly a score of unwounded men remained in our hands and a few wounded. It was a foolish adventure as far as the enemy was concerned, and designed by some battalion commander to win the favour of Headquarters at the expense of his men's lives. This, and a few small raids on each side, are the only interruptions of the quietude of the infantry in their snow-bound trenches.

Yesterday I went to see the battlefields round Lens under the snow, and was startled by the deathly silence of them and the white peace of them. Only very rarely there was the sullen bark of a gun, short and gruff in the still air, and there was no sign of life, no look of life, in that mining city whose broken roofs were all white under the snow, or in the suburbs of Lievin, where our men live, or in the German lines which stretch away from Sallaumines. The old trenches on the way to them were filled with snow, and the fields where thousands of men have fought and died, French as well as English, were white and glistening, and all their litter of destruction was hidden. It was difficult going, for the slopes were covered with ice, and one slipped and fell a score of times, and having slid down into an old trench it was absurdly hard to get on the other side. The snow had camouflaged the shell-craters, which were filled with ice, so that what looked like solid ground was a covered hole into which one fell deep. Below the snow were the white bones of men, French soldier boys who died on this ground three years ago, and the old barbed wire which had guarded their front line, the broken strands of it, was thickly furred with frost.

The ruins behind our lines look more romantic under snow than when their bricks are bare and their broken rafters are black. Arras, into which I went yesterday, is as beautiful as a dream-picture, with a cold, white sadness in its desolate and destroyed streets. The snow takes away some of the brutality of its mutilation, and all its broken houses and shell-pierced roofs, and the stone carv-

ings on buildings which once belonged to the glory of the French Renaissance are haunting in their effect upon one's vision with this whiteness on them. Arras is like a stage-picture of war in a mediæval city, and the few soldiers who pass down its lonely ways seem to belong to that old-world scene, for in their hairy coats—their stink-coats as they call them—and in their steel hats to which the snowflakes cling, they might be the English men-at-arms who fought with King Harry at Agincourt 500 years ago. Through the snow-storm yesterday our men went up to the lines, with a scrunch of feet on the soft tracks and the whirling flakes so thick about them that they were like white ghosts. Gunners brought long teams of mules down to the wagon-lines. The poor beasts looked very cold, and each man bent his head sideways to the blizzard, and the breast of his leather tunic was thickly covered as though with fleece, and there was a wreath of snow about the rim of his steel hat. These are the white pictures of our winter warfare, and they are worth describing, because they hold the drama of a million men's lives.

JANUARY 13

IT is six weeks since the German counter-attacks at Cambrai, two months since our capture of Passchendaele, and the lines have been quiet since then under the heavy snow, except for bursts of gun-fire and night raids, and that flame assault last week. Even in the line the tumult of the fighting months has died down into quiet days and nights, with only odd moments of savage shelling as a reminder that the devil is not yet dead, so that our men up there have not too bad a time. Some of them I know—those Gordons of whom I have given glimpses up and down the roads of war—had quite a good time on Hogmanay night within 400 yards of the enemy. They sent me an invitation, but I had not the luck to be there, and it was one of their officers who described the scene to me. In some caves quarried deep below the trenches and lighted with electric

lamps—there was a horrid moment when the engine stopped working and threatened to plunge them all in darkness—they had a feast night, and the spirit of Scotland moved among them and lived in their songs and speeches, with the memory of gallant comrades who had been with them a year ago and are no longer with them. The pipers came into the caves, and their music filled these rocky vaults with wild sound, very haunting in its call to Scottish hearts; but it was imprisoned below ground and did not reach the German lines. The little dim light glowed on the steel helmets of the Gordons and made fantastic shadows on the walls as the pipers marched up and down, and shone in the eyes of the officers and men as they sipped hot rum punch and felt its warmth in their hearts. Four officers who had fought through the Somme together—there are only four now of those who held the lines at Martinpuich—raised their glasses to each other and toasted the colonel, who thinks of them from afar, waiting for a wound to heal in his lung, and yearning to come out again because though he hates war he loves his battalion. He is the Georgian gentleman who has appeared as a heroic figure in some of my sketches, and one day he will reappear and the pipes will play him back with the march tune of his own clan.

Up in the line there was a pint of hot cocoa every night dispensed from a Y.M.C.A. dug-out by a great-hearted soul who once wrote books and plays which all the world knows, and now finds happiness for a wounded heart in serving our soldiers in that danger zone. He had to borrow a steel hat and a gasbag to go up to a place which he says smells strongly of hell. But he had no need to borrow a soldier's courage.

Yesterday I met the Gordons in their billets, and took tea in their mess with a score or so of officers at a long table in an old house which stands undamaged in a ruined town. That was a good picture, not without the romance of history in it. If I were a painter, instead of a journeyman of words, I should love to get the colour of it down

on canvas, with the faces of those Scots in the candle-light and the firelight, in that old brown panelled room, with its broken bits of gilding and its high-backed chairs. The officers of the Scottish archers who were the bodyguard of Louis XI, might have sat in such a room as this in this very town, and I think the faces of these mediæval soldiers would have been like those I saw round the table yesterday—clean-cut, brown, and hard, with that steady look in the eyes which comes to men who have stared into the face of death.

"What do you think of the prospects?" I asked honest John, who has got wisdom in his hard pate.

"We're waiting for the Boche to show his hand," he said, "and we're ready for him. It seems likely that he will try to break our lines, but if he couldn't do it before when he had ten to one, how can he hope to do it now when it will be man for man and gun for gun? We shall hold him all right."

That is the faith of all our men. They are not afraid of this menace of masses of men and guns which may be brought against us if the enemy's threat is fulfilled. They are sure of their defensive strength, sure of our artillery, sure of their own courage, and they believe that however great the enemy's assault it will be smashed with great slaughter. So their faith is not shaken, although they know better than all others that when this year's fighting begins it will be ferocious. They are waiting for the enemy's challenge to the struggle which may decide the fate of the world. They are waiting now for the arena to be cleared of snow and for the roads leading up to it to harden after the thaw that has now set in. For a few days they looked to the likelihood of some other kind of settlement by statesmen rather than by soldiers, by ideas rather than by high expolsives, but now the enemy seems to want war again instead of peace, and our men are ready to give him all he wants if it is for slaughter that he asks. If the enemy presses his challenge on this Western Front I be-

lieve that there will be greater slaughter than there has ever been in this war, though blood has flowed in rivers.

JANUARY 16

THE other night I went to the Theatre Royal of the Western Front. *Robinson Crusoe* was on the bill, as performed by some of His Majesty's Players, who wear kilts when they are not in fancy dress, and belong to a division with whom the enemy is most intimately acquainted.

The Theatre Royal of the Western Front is a famous and distinguished house, though slightly in need of decoration and repairs owing to the ventilation of its roof by shell-fire—for these little accidents will happen even in war time. But it presented a brilliant aspect the other night, and was quite an historic scene. In the "royal box," with its tattered brocade and tarnished gilding, there was a party of generals and staff officers, and the dress circle was filled with regimental officers who a week or two ago were staring at snow scenes in No Man's Land, and saying "A merry Christmas—I don't think."

The stalls were crowded with men of many battalions, English, Scottish, and Irish, gunners and engineers and signallers and machine-gun companies. But what was most thrilling in the scene was the presence of no fewer than two ladies in the stage box, sitting on either side of a gallant officer in his stink-coat, or hairy. They were real ladies, and not soldiers in disguise, to give an extra touch of splendour to the scene. For three years and more they had been living underground, coming up for light and air between storms of high explosives, but now they had put on evening dress, and looked like dowager duchesses at Covent Garden after a robbery of their jewels. It was very pleasant to have them there, and as they could not understand a word of the performance there was no need for the funny men to restrain the exuberance of their humour, which was very convenient. Down below the footlights the stringed orchestra played delightfully, and a fellow in

the corner with the tenor drums had a number of subsidiary instruments for ragtime effects which thrilled the house, especially when he made a whole choir of birds sing to a solo by Robinson Crusoe, with background of palm-trees and sun-splashed islands, painted by a non-commissioned officer with beauty in his brush.

Robinson Crusoe was a one-pip man who deserves crossed swords for the amount of pleasure he has given to great numbers of men by training his company to fight the enemy of depression. Polly Perkins with her rosebud mouth and coy ways was as pretty a child as you may find in any company of kilted men after slight alterations by the make-up expert, and Mrs. Crusoe, who comes from Glasgow, with striped stockings and strong accent and a weakness for unsweetened gin, had a sense of humour which would bring a smile to the face of a German colonel in a prisoners' cage—which is not easy.

I am bound to say, however, with due acknowledgments to two funny sailormen and Man Friday and a young seaman with a voice like the west wind in a song by Shelley, that my fancy was particularly taken by a comedian with a face of most whimsical variety. He had strange mirth-provoking gestures, and a sense of life's little ironies in war time so sharp that it cut the ground beneath one's feet. He is a man of distinguished family, and has as his crest four sergeant-majors rampant on a field of as you were. The audience of soldiers—men just out of the line—roared with laughter for two hours, and that is as good for them as a rum ration on a cold night in the trenches, and more lasting in effect.

After the theatre I went to dinner with the same crowd that celebrated Hogmanay night in the caves 400 yards from the German line. They have made me an honorary member of their mess, and I have had no greater honour. It was a great dinner. The Germans were 400 yards away from the pipes on Hogmanay night, and I was only three inches away when nine tall and proper men with the pipes

flung across their shoulders came marching in and stood behind the long table, where thirty officers sat in the old panelled room. It was stirring music, a little alarming to the ears at first until a Saxon got quite used to it, but very glorious, and filled with the heroic spirit of Scotland, with the haunting memories of many gallant ghosts, and the badness of old far-off times. The Scottish officers around me, with the lamplight on their faces and shadows about them in this room, gave shrill cries and applauded after each march and each strathspey. Then a glass of whisky was given to the pipe-major, and he raised it high and wished good health to his officer in Gaelic, which I can't spell. After that there were Highland reels, danced to the rippling notes of a clarionet played by an officer who had the greatest endurance in wind-power of any man I have ever met. I watched that eightsome with envy because of its spirit and vitality and joyousness as danced by officers, who put their souls into it and challenged each other with wild barbaric cries, and with a shining light in their eyes, though there was only one candle in the room, and the panelled walls seemed to recede from us into the shadow-world.

These men are the fighting men. They are waiting, like hundreds of thousands more, for the fate of this year to declare its hand and for new battles to begin. Meanwhile they are glad of the rest behind the lines, and fill every hour of it with as much fun as they can grab out of the luck of life.

II

The Message of Spring

January 31

We are still waiting on the Western Front—waiting for the spring to come and waiting for orders which in this new year of war will decide the fate of the world in some way by blood or by peace. But no direct challenge comes.

The guns, which are the modern heralds of battle, have not roared out their summons. In the enemy's camp, that vast camp of Central Europe where the councils of war are surrounded by people crying for bread and peace, angry now as well as agonized, there seems to be hesitation and delay, as though the generals were afraid of giving the word which, if it comes, will hurl the last reserves of their manhood into the dice-box of this gambler's throw with fate.

So there is a stand to of our armies in the field. All along the lines our men are ready and waiting. Their rifles are on the fire-steps, and their machine-guns are clean. The gunners will be quick to hear those words, "Prepare for action!" which come before a battle. But now it is quiet along the line, and there is only the noise of single rounds from howitzers shooting at some special target, or from a long-range gun reaching out to some place far behind the German lines, or a sudden gust of fury from a battery of field-guns slashing into the silence of the battle-fields, awaking the slumbering devils of war, and then, after ten minutes of tumult, obeying the order of "Cease fire!" from some young officer with two pips on his shoulder. So it was along one sector of the Front yesterday. Not for a year have I known so great a hush over the lines. I could see the enemy's trenches winding in a white, snaky way over the slope, and the old city of St.-Quentin, where he lives in vaults and tunnels. I saw the high walls of the cathedral scarred by shell-fire, and houses with broken roofs, and the sunlight caught a glass roof or a window-pane which, by some freak of luck, had not been smashed, and made it shine like a flame. On the right one gun fired with steady strokes that hammered into the silence every minute to the tick. It was one of our guns, and there was no answer.

It was all of a sudden that a kind of toy battle opened, disturbing this quietude by a snapping and barking of small shells and machine-gun fire. It was when two hos-

tile aeroplanes came overhead and two of ours passed them in a sky that was blue and cloudless above the mist. One of our men was the first to declare war. He flew over St.-Quentin, and a sudden, flat, thudding explosion there was proof that he had dropped a bomb. He circled back, and instantly the German Archies opened fire on him, and little black puffs pursued him as their shrapnel burst. Then the German planes came out and our Archies flung a barrage in their way, and our shrapnel dotted the sky with white puff balls. From the slopes where the German trenches wound snakily and from folds in the earth on our side of the lines, where I had seen no sign of life when I passed, there began a chattering conversation of machine-gun fire. It was like a duet on kettle-drums. All this fuss travelled down the lines as the aeroplanes went their way, and it was as though queer beasts who had been sleeping in the folds of the earth on this quiet afternoon had been aroused, as the dogs of a village join in the chorus of yapping when a stranger comes by. Then it was silent again except for the gun on the right, which still plugged away every minute to the tick. There seems no life on the battlefields, no human being in this solitude, but below ground everywhere there are good fellows of ours, friends of mine and yours, very much alive, though hidden in their earth holes. One cannot find them without a guide unless by accident, but a friendly soul who knows the ground will suddenly drop down into a ditch and say, "Let's look in at Brigade Headquarters," or "Let's see what the Battalion Headquarters can do in the way of a drink," or "Dear old Charlie is not a hundred yards away from here." . . . The Brigade Headquarters is glad to see a visitor from the outer world. The battalion officers are glad to welcome you in their dug-outs if you have the password of good-fellowship. "Dear old Charlies" will give you his philosophy on war and life as it is viewed from the angle of a hole in the ground, fitted up with deal shelves, a wire bed, and a wooden bench.

Into such a ditch I went yesterday, and met some very

gallant gentlemen, who make the best out of life below ground, and remember all the funny stories they heard when last on leave, and ask for news of London, like men who have been long shipwrecked on a desert island. These troglodytes are merry grigs as a rule, with a sense of irony which finds the weak spots in the armour of the world's conceit. As truth tellers, hiding nothing and stripping life bare of its wraps and rags, you cannot meet their like, and out of these trenches and these dug-outs there will come, I think, a new philosophy. Meanwhile, they are waiting for the next act in this drama of war, ready to face it with steady eyes, whatever its frightfulness.

FEBRUARY 8

THE hush before the storm. Here and there along our front for an hour or two of uproar the enemy's guns are flinging over shell-fire, very fierce and concentrated while it lasts, and our guns are answering or shooting before the challenge with the same sudden gusts of fury. But there is nothing systematic in this. It is not the beginning of those long bombardments which precede infantry battles on a wide front after the massing of many batteries. It is only the harassing fire of winter warfare, and there still reigns over our battlefields a strange, unearthly silence between these bouts of shooting. It has seemed to me during the last few days when I have been up at the Front as though Nature herself were in suspense waiting and watching and listening for the beginning of that conflict of men which is expected before the year grows much older perhaps before the first crocus thrusts up through the moist leaves, and before there is the first glint of green in the woods.

Yesterday it was immensely quiet again along that part of the line where I happened to be—on the extreme right where the village of La Fère lies broken in the marshes of the Oise, below St.-Quentin. We could see the enemy's country stretching out before us, slope melting into slope

through the mists of the day, and one hill, naked of trees at the top, stark and bluff against the sky dominating our own countryside with direct observation. There were ruined villages on the enemy's side of the line like those on ours. Somewhere in the folds of earth were his guns, and nearer to us the hidden emplacements of his machine-guns, and below ground in their dug-outs his men. A menace was there and a secret—the menace of death, the secret of the enemy's plans, but everywhere that strange silence. Not a gun fired for an hour or more, not a rifle shot. Life seemed to have gone from this land. Nothing moved. No bird sang in the thickets. No smoke curled from the chimneys of villages still standing behind the German lines. It was all dead and still. Only the wind stirred in the rank grass that grows over old wheatfields, and a little tremor of life in the wet earth and the trees that are waiting for the spring. In this hush the very wind, soft and warm yesterday over these battlefields, seemed to hold its breath expectant of the things that one day soon will break the spell of silence and shock the sky with noise. Some men of ours came winding over the grassy track to a pile of old ruins on a high slope called Fort de Liez, near Barisis. After their march they sat down in a ditch with their packs against a broken wall and lit their cigarettes at the journey's end not far from the enemy.

An officer came and stood by my side and looked over the enemy's lines. "When is this battle going to begin?" he asked, by way of opening the conversation. I said, "What battle? It looks as though the war had ended." "Yes," he answered, with a queer smile in his eyes, "I have seen this sort of thing before; it's what you might call the hush before the storm."

He was with a company of London men relieving another crowd. "Write something good about us," said one of them with a grin, and I said, "I'm always writing something good about you, because I come from the same old

town, and because you have done as well as we all knew you would."

"Well, don't forget the London Rangers," said the boy. Down a long road within gun-fire of the enemy came a black omnibus with men's rifles and steel hats shining over the top. It was one of the old London 'buses bringing the same lads who used to board it at Charing Cross on the way up to the Bank.

In other places on other days lately I have met men who ask in a casual sort of way, "When is the fighting going to begin again?" and then discuss the prospects of the year with a curious air of aloofness as though they were a thousand miles away from the fighting lines, though only less than a gunshot off. Opinions differ from one dug-out to another. I have heard fairly reasoned arguments as to the improbability of a great German offensive. "The enemy will attack us in several places," say other thoughtful voices over the wooden tables of the dug-outs. "He is not massing all these divisions on this front out of mere bluff. He has enough men to make several subsidiary attacks to his main thrust, and he will use them and the crowds of guns behind them. He may count on surprise to roll up the line quickly. It won't be an old-time offensive anyhow. He will try for open warfare on a big scale."

"And supposing it fails?" I ask. "Oh, it will fail all right," comes the answer from a strategist with one pip on his shoulder, "but it may not be all honey for us." So the talk goes on from one mess to another all along the lines, and everywhere these men of ours are trying to look forward into the future, which is not very distant—which may be only a few days away or a few weeks. But they do not dwell on these subjects very long, for there are other things to think and talk about, the small technicalities of war in the trench ahead of them, the business of wiring and road-making, the preparations for a new raid, the latest adventure in the line, or the extra bit of comfort in their own dug-out. They are pretty comfortable now, some of

our dug-outs in the battlefields, with good tunnels behind lit by electricity, and many small conveniences for a human kind of life—enormously better than in the old days of warfare in the Ypres salient.

"Have a wash," said a friend of mine the other day, when I arrived in his hole in the ground, and after washing out of a leather bucket, I noticed how shipshape this little bedroom was, with shaving tackle and brushes arranged on a neat dressing-table, and a shelf above the bed for books of good choice, and a few pictures on the wall to bring a little colour of life into this small dungeon. Through a tunnel was the officers' mess, with some delectable cakes on the table, and round them a party of good fellows who made one feel at home. The senior officer brought out a puppy which had been found as a waif and stray of the trenches, and I heard of another dog found—though not here—in the trenches a night or two ago. It was a German messenger dog, and the message it carried was a warning to the men, "The colonel is coming."

A young gunner, who had dropped in for tea, was enthusiastic about his latest gun-pits, which afterwards he took me to see. Outside the dug-out was a silent fellow enjoying the sunset effects above a chalk cutting, and the silhouettes of a working party with picks and shovels etched blackly as they passed by on the sky-line. "A quiet spot," I said. "A good spot," was his answer, "but not so damned quiet as all that. The Boche got two direct hits yesterday. Very good shooting."

At night lately there has been a brilliant show of stars, as the other night when we located our way home by the pointers of the Great Bear, and presently the whole constellation of the heavens shone out with a million little lights, and the Milky Way was splashed across their path.

The ruined villages behind the lines were all black with jagged edges against the pale glamour of this night sky, except where camp-fires glowed in gutted rooms sheltered by blanket screens, where our men were having their last

meal of the day, or writing home by candle-light. Sometimes through the shell-holes in standing walls came a glow of red, as the sky behind was lit by gun-flashes. All along the line the Very-lights were rising and falling like soap-bubbles that are blown out of a pipe—bubbles of brilliant white light, which have fifteen seconds of life, and then go out. The dead trees of the highways of war, with their lopped branches and slashed trunks, stand like ghosts in this fitful darkness, and over all the old battlefields there are ghosts of memory that steal about one and touch one's soul with their coldness.

But the air has been warm o' nights, and the wet west wind of the days has been singing the spring song across the fields where French peasants, old French women or young mothers of men are ploughing up the brown earth for the sowing of another year of life. It is good to see the glint of the steel plough, for so many fields further forward are desolate, and nothing moves over them but flocks of hungry rooks and solitary magpies, and at night the legions of the battlefield rats.

Snowdrops are out in the woods, and the bosom of the earth is astir and the sap is rising in the young unslaughtered trees. But our men who watch this changing of the seasons in this good country of France know that to them the spring song will be a battle song. They are watching and waiting, while the days pass quickly and lengthen out in their hours of light.

FEBRUARY 17

OWING to a hard frost and a bright sun and a keen east wind which has blown the mists away, visibility has been good for the past two days, and the airmen on both sides have been fighting for reconnaissance, and the gunners—ours and the enemy's—have been firing more heavily than for several weeks past on various sectors of the Front by direct or aeroplane observation. The enemy's fire has been for harassing purposes over a wide extent of country

from Flanders to the Cambrai area. Between six o'clock and midnight last night he bombarded the ground about Passchendaele heavily, and his guns were active on Friday against the Ypres-Staden railway, our line below the Vimy Ridge, the trenches from Lens to Hulluch, and those south-west of the Cambrai sector. There is no special significance in this beyond a good day to kill something, and it gives no indication of the enemy's intentions, nor is it the beginning of the great battles which soon must come out of the blue, or out of the mists, while the year is young.

Yesterday, I was up on the Flanders battlefields, and saw once again that vast desolation through which our men fought last year for five months of enormous conflict. The weather has changed the aspect of it all since I was last there. The ground, which was a quagmire when our troops sank up to their waists sometimes if they left the duck-board tracks on their way to the enemy's "pill-boxes," is now as hard as iron. All the shell-craters which were ponds then are now filled with ice. But nothing has changed the infernal nature of this belt of ground, fifteen miles long and ten miles deep, which our men gained after months of most fierce fighting to the crest of Passchendaele, and the frost has solidified it, as a perpetual reminder of the enormous conflict of men and guns, which tore and gashed these slopes of earth, piercing it with millions of craters, sweeping it bare of life and strewing it with gruesome wreckage. The frost seems to have petrified it so that the ridge of each shell-crater is sharp and hard. It is as cold and barren and dead as the crater-land of the moon. And there in this dead land were our gunners and our men guarding it from the enemy, who may wish to come back to the slopes which he held. They live there below the frozen ground, have their life there among the shattered pill-boxes and the old upheaved trenches, and eat and sleep in this great graveyard of nature and youth. Somewhere from the fissures of the earth our guns were firing. I could see the flashes but not the guns. In observation posts

looking out to the enemy's lines, boys of ours, hidden in muckheaps of frozen earth and rubbish of battle, stared through field-glasses at the enemy's outposts and watched the enemy's shelling. There was not much shell-fire, but crumps were bursting below us, and now and then a big puff of black shrapnel came into the blue of the sky.

I spoke to a sergeant in one of these places. He had been in Flanders for fifteen months, and said that he and his boys had got used to the life. "We used to fret at first," he said; "we were always looking for the end, but now it seems the natural way of life, and we don't think much of the end, but just settle down and carry on from one day to the other and make the best of it."

These inhuman places have become humanized by our men who live in them, and the most abnormal thing on earth has become normal to them.

"What are the enemy's chances if he attacks?" I said to this man. "Here?" he asked, and then laughed. "If he tries to come across here he will catch cold." He did not mean a cold in the nose.

In Flanders and down by Lens, where I went the day before, staring into a street of that silent city of the mine fields, which I have seen on fire with the sweep of battle, there were no obvious signs of any imminent attack. Apart from scattered shell-fire and occasional bursts of machine-gunning, as though literary gentlemen there had sudden inspirations and were rattling their typewriters at great speed, or as though demon coffin-makers were spitting out tacks and hammering them into the planks with rapid strokes, these old places of death had quietened down, and one could walk with a sense of safety where until the end of last year one walked in fear. Enemy planes came into the sky yesterday over the Passchendaele Ridge, flying high between our clusters of shrapnel and over the white ruins of Ypres, clear-cut and dazzling, like rain-washed rocks, against the cloudless blue, through which the sunlight streamed. There was the noise of air fighting where our

flying men and the enemy's met and challenged each other beyond the sight of men on earth.

It was the same old scene of war which I have described a hundred times, but it was as though the orchestra of the guns were just tuning up while the actors were rehearsing behind the scene for another drama of historic tragedy, for which there has not been time to begin. And that is exactly the truth of things.

FEBRUARY 18

At any moment now we may see the beginning of the enemy's last and desperate effort to end the war by a decisive victory, for the offensive which he has been preparing for months is imminent. In my recent messages I have described the waiting attitude of our armies in this time of comparative quietude along the lines, and the uncanny sense one has had of a portentous secret hidden behind the silence of the enemy's trenches. "What are those beggars doing there?" asks one man of another, as they stare over No Man's Land to ruined villages and dark woods where there is no sign of life. "Up to some dirty work," said some of them. And they were right. They are not idle over there, those field-grey men. They are being urged on to hurried labour, which is part of the secret of their Higher Command, and these men know that every trench they dig is a pathway to a battle which will soak the ground with their blood before many days are past, and that every new gun-pit they build is one stage further to new fields of slaughter. Each side has been trying to discover the secret of the other—the plans to which every bit of work along the line may give a clue. Each side has been trying to blind the other's eyes and prevent observation of activity. The German gunners have a "hate" against our balloons, and try to shoot them down by long-range guns, because in the baskets below them are two pairs of watchful eyes noting the activity of their trains behind the lines, and any movement on the roads. They hate still more our airmen who

every day for many days past have been flying over the enemy's lines, spotting their new battle positions, photographing their new saps, and assembly trenches, and ammunition dumps, and attacking the enemy's air squadrons whenever they come out to beat back these observers. They cannot prevent this work of reconnaissance and there have been scores of encounters in the air lately in which many hostile machines have been crashed to earth and brought down in flames. The enemy has been desperately anxious to find out our intentions and strength at certain points of the line, and has attempted many raids to get prisoners and information. Our raids with the object of getting to the heart of the secret that lies behind the silence of the lines have been more successful than his on the whole, and we have been lucky in getting prisoners who have revealed much of what we wanted to know.

We know now that the enemy is preparing to attack us heavily between Arras and St.-Quentin, and that his preparations are ready, so that we may expect this offensive any day now that the weather conditions are favourable. It will not be preceded by days of bombardment nor by a registration of guns revealing the batteries which he has brought up secretly under cover of darkness. With a short and sharp bombardment, the use of gas shells, and of a number of Tanks he will launch the attack suddenly, relying upon surprise of time and place, the rapidity and power of his movement, and the excited enthusiasm of his troops, whom he has endeavoured by every kind of spell and "dope" to inspire with a belief that victory and peace are within their grasp.

The German Higher Command have hurried forward for political as well as military reasons. The interior conditions of Germany, the sullen spirit that has been crushed but not killed after the strikes, the attitude of Austria, the growing pressure of public opinion in the Central Empires against this last great gamble with the blood of their manhood, and the steady growth of the American army in

France, are all factors which are spurring on the German generals to strike soon in order to gain some showy success and to silence the cry of the people by the advertisement of victory. Behind their lines is a terrific industry and a high nervous tension like that of a nation drugged by hasheesh. Civilians have been impressed to dig new trenches. New railways have been built to carry up men and guns and ammunition. Far behind the lines, eighty miles or more, the German stosstruppen *or storm troops, many of them from Russia, are being trained in new methods of attack for open warfare. The depots are crowded with reserves ready to support the advance waves and fill up the slaughtered gaps. The hospitals have been cleared, and many new buildings have been put up for the reception of the tide of wounded which will flow back. All leave has been stopped for German officers and men, and there is not one among them who does not know that in a little while he will be flung into the furnace fires of another Marne and another Verdun, in which there will be great carnage.*

To inspire the German people to hold out a little while longer, to suppress the spirit of revolt among them so that the military leaders may make this throw with fate, fantastic stories are being spread about among neutrals and in their own Press, and by secret word which is carefully spread broadcast, of new methods of attack which will ensure success. Bogeys are faked up and put in circulation. The German soldier as well as the German people have been given special treatment for moral. *Both of them have been disappointed too often by promises of victory and peace to believe in them again without some new tricks. As long ago as* 1914 *they were promised the war would be over before the leaves of autumn fell. Galicia, Verdun, the battles of the Isonzo were in turn to give them victories. The U-boat war was to starve England to surrender by August last. So now the decisive blow in the West by new methods of frightfulness is the very latest, and I think the last, spell that will hold the German people and army to-*

gether until it has been tried. The army has been hardest to inspire. Men who went through the blood bath of the Somme and the horrors of Flanders are not easily duped as to the ease with which they are expected to smash our defences. The old methods of attack with the preliminary bombardment conjure up terrors which they are not willing to face. So they have been trained to this new form of secret attack, and their officers have tried to convince them that they can roll up our lines. It was not easy. While many of their officers seem confident that the gamble is worth trying, the men murmur and have no faith in the fairy-tale of an easy break through. Kanonenfleisch, *say the men—cannon-fodder.*

"How many men are willing to fight to the end?" said General Ludendorff at Laon to a parade of his troops. One non-commissioned officer and six men stepped out of the ranks. I believe that if the first wild onslaught fails, as our armies are convinced it will fail, the German officers will find it hard to drive their men to fresh bouts of slaughter, and the German people will cry out in agony for the cessation of this sacrifice.

At the moment they are drugged and under the spell of a frightful secret hope. They know that many of the tales spread among them are false, but pretend to themselves that they are credible. They are a nation with bloodshot eyes and a high temperature of fever, buoyed up by artificial stimulants to a last period of resistance against the despair that eats into their hearts. The reaction, if their hopes fail, will be a wild one. By the grace of all goodness they will fail. Not only the attacks that are imminent against ourselves, but the blows that will be struck against the French will fail if the courage of the men and the faith of the men, the readiness of great armies, the power of our guns, and above all the spirit behind the guns may defend the world from this menace. Whatever the cost, our men will not fail, and the prayers of our people should be with them.

FEBRUARY 20

ALTHOUGH to-day is dull, the last two days have been wonderfully bright for the time of year, with a blue sky over the frosted fields, and our airmen have made the most of visibility by getting out and about across the enemy's lines, noting the changes there, and watching for any movement on his rails and roads.

It is not often in this war, nor in many places, that one can see the enemy himself above ground except in actual battle, for, as a rule, if a man is seen he dies, but two days ago I had the chance to see many German soldiers behind their lines, no bigger than ants to the naked eye, but through one's glasses quite clear and distinct as human creatures, busy with some purpose of their own. They came winding down a tract 2000 yards away, on the hill of St.-Gobain, above the Oise, not knowing, I guess, that they could be seen from the hummock of earth whither I had crawled into a hole to look through a squint-box. First came a column of lorries, and then a body of marching men, and then a party of cyclists. The track was white in the sun against the green of the grass, and these men moved very slowly, like a creeping shadow. It gave me a queer emotion to see them there in their own lines, these field-grey men, who are hidden as a rule until our own men go forward in attack to rout them out of their holes and ditches after enormous bombardments. It was as though one saw the inhabitants of another planet through some monstrous telescope, and truly these German soldiers are as distant from us, as strange to us in ideas and purpose, as though they dwelt beyond the stars. . . . At least, while the trenches divide us the link seems to have snapped between their human nature and ours. Yet they were less than two miles away, moving in the same sunlight that cast a shadow across my hummock of earth.

Behind them, much further away, were the guns which have no human nature, but which in this war seem to the infantry like the powers that belong to the Spirit of Evil,

blind in their destruction, careless in their choice of victims, ruthless as the old devil gods of the world's first darkness. It was a quiet day on this part of the line, as on most others just now in this breathing space before great battles, but the German guns were sending over some ranging shots and doing a little target practice against some of our positions. As I walked towards the knoll from which I could see the hill track, they sent over some woolly bears—a mixture of high explosive and shrapnel, which burst high up in the blue as though a bottle of ink had been spilt on a silken cloth. They spread out like that in a widening smudge, and were as black as that, but burst so high that they did no kind of damage.

Down below the little knoll on our side of the lines was the village of Amigny-Rouy, 500 yards away, and the enemy pounded it with 5.9's for ten minutes or so, and then ceased fire, so that with the midday sun on its walls and the shadow of some fruit-trees etched in a pattern against its red roofs, it looked a place of slumbering peace. "A cosy-looking village, that," said a man who came up in the quietude. "Not so jolly cosy fifteen minutes ago," I answered, and presently the fraud of this peacefulness was revealed when the enemy's guns started again, and his crumps came over with their whining cries, followed by the gruff cough of their burst down there among the wattled walls and red-tiled roofs. All the quietude along the Front is like this. It looks so much like peace that one's soul might be deceived except by the knowledge that out of the silence the fury will come again. Our men are not deceived, however quiet the line, and they are watching every tiny sign in the enemy's lines, the slightest change in the shape of a trench or a mound of earth, the daily habits of the enemy's shell-fire, any unaccustomed movement which may be detected by sound or sight with vigilant senses.

"What are the enemy's chances of attack?" I asked. It

was a private soldier, a signaller, who answered in one grim sentence. "The chance of getting hell," he said.

I think that is the belief of most of our men, not only in this part of the line, but in others; and I believe also that if the enemy persists in his preparations for the offensive against us, and then drives his men forward, they will pay a hellish price for any ground they get.

For the first time they will bring up Tanks against us to break through our wire. They have copied our Tanks and our method of using them against wired defences. But our Tank pilots and their commanders smile at this menace, while accepting the compliment of imitation. "We had to learn by bitter experience," some of them said to me yesterday, "and the Germans have got to buy their knowledge in the same school. We are many battles ahead of them, and we shall make rings round them with any luck." It is not boastfulness, but knowledge, that makes them confident.

Yesterday I rode across the fields in a Tank as the sun was setting, and a big family of Tanks had come home to tea after their day's work, and were squatting round the camp with a golden haze about them. They looked inert and sluggish things, but if the enemy's Tanks come out against them there will be some deadly work.

The German soldiers must realize the power that lies behind our lines—a power of which these engines are but a small unit—and I believe that thousands of men like those I saw winding down the hill track are filled with horror at the thought of the slaughter that awaits them if they are hurled against our strength. But the days are passing, and their time is drawing near.

III

The Long New Line

FEBRUARY 21

It was revealed a few weeks ago that we had taken over from the French a part of the line round about St.-Quentin,

in order to liberate some of the troops of our Allies for operations elsewhere. Since then we have been gradually extending the length of our front on the right of our armies. This will render a considerable service to the French, by economizing their man-power at a critical time, and it is remarkable evidence of our own confidence that, after the tremendous fighting last year and the departure of some of our divisions to Italy, we should be willing to lengthen our lines to this extent.

Several times lately I have visited this new part of the Front, above St.-Quentin to the Oise, and the country that leads up to it, with more interest than I can now find in the old battlefields, because this ground is different in its nature, and still sweet and clean in the absence of continual gun-fire. Our men who came to take it over from the French—men who had been in the mud and fire of Flanders—stared around and said, "This seems like Paradise." It was Paradise to them because of its quietude and beauty, but they knew the old serpent of evil was about, and one officer, as I have told before, said, "It is too quiet to be good. And when is the battle going to begin?" He and the men with him had taken over that very morning. They hardly knew the points of the compass, and had but a vague idea of the whereabouts of the enemy until other officers came up to hand over and make them wise.

From points of vantage along this new front one can look straight across to the German lines where the River Oise and its canal are in the flats and marshes below our own slopes. Their outposts are there among the willows on the edge of a No Man's Land which is as wide as 1000 yards in places because of the swamps made by the breaking of the canal bank, and behind them is a formidable trench system, part of the Hindenburg line, from Quéant down to Laon.

The little town of La Fère is in the river-bed on the east side of the canal as an outer bastion of their defences, without any sign of life there under its broken roofs and

behind shell-pierced walls beyond the ruin of St.-Firmin Church. From our observation posts on ground that rises into hummocky hills above the St.-Quentin Canal we can look straight into La Fère and into the villages of Achery, Mayot, and Brissay, where the German outposts have their dug-outs under the ruins.

A thin grey mist crept about these places when I stared at them the other day, and they seemed abandoned by all human life. No smoke was above those ruins. No sound of work or war disturbed the utter silence of these marshlands and these broken houses behind a thin screen of trees, wet and shiny after rain. But sometimes our men see German soldiers moving there beyond the river, a sentry pacing up and down his post, a grey figure motionless among the reeds with a rifle slung across his shoulders.

South-east of the Oise the ground rises to a ridge which stands as a high rampart in the German lines. It is called the Massif de St.-Gobain, and the northern end of it, which tapers down to the plain again, is known as the Tail of Monceau. This abrupt range above the marshlands dominates all the surrounding country, and gives the enemy a wide observation of our lines and roads and villages for miles around. It is bare and treeless on the heights, like a Devonshire tor, and when I looked at it the other day, black and grim under a grey sky, it seemed to me as a prehistoric castle with ramparts and battlements casting a dark shadow over the woods and villages below. Here some old chieftain of Celtic France might have made his castle and his camp, with a horde of shaggy warriors and a minstrel or two to sing their bloody exploits, and some women in the skins of beasts. The mists lay about its lower slopes, giving a look of mystery and romance to this natural fortress where the Germans are strongly entrenched.

All this country, south and east of St.-Quentin, is wild and rugged—what the French call *accidenté*, with great forests like that of Coucy, where there are still descendants

of the wild boar which the Kings of France used to hunt. Behind our lines this forest land is continued, and our men go through big, dark woods like those of Savy and Holnon and Frieres and Haute Tombolle. They have not been slashed to death by shell-fire, though shells have crushed between their glades, and when the spring and summer make them leafy again they will seem as good to our men as the forest of Arden, though no sweet Rosalind will be there, or as Shrewsbury Forest—not that by Glencorse Wood—when Robin Hood and his merry men lived under the greenwood tree in the springtime of the world—as good as that, unless the enemy fills them with fire and death.

Further north, where the canal goes up to St.-Quentin, the ground is more open, with a chain of gentle slopes rising beyond that old city, so that the enemy's defensive lines follow their contours. A few weeks ago it was so quiet hereabout that it was possible to walk behind our lines in full view of the enemy's position without danger, and, what is stranger, without much sense of danger. I walked into the village of Dallon, on the left side of the St.-Quentin Canal, the other day. To the right of me was the ruined village of Urvillers, with the German village of Itancourt across the way up the slope.

Ahead of me, so close that I could see the holes in its roofs and walls and separate buildings broken by shell-fire, and the white masonry of its cathedral, stood the city of St.-Quentin. I had seen this town first a year ago, when the enemy retreated from a wide stretch of country east of Péronne after the destruction of the villages. From the Bois d'Holnon I first saw the towers of St.-Quentin and those streets into which the old "Contemptibles" came in the first months of the war. But this view from the south-west is closer—so close that it seemed but a short walk and an easy way into the heart of it, and so quiet that death did not seem near at hand, if one went a little further forward. The cathedral stood square and white above the houses. Its pointed roof had been shot away, and its

walls were scarred by shell-fire, and light shone through its empty window spaces, but the great body of it had not been shattered by the storm of war. The Palais de Justice and the theatre and barracks were clearly visible above the lower buildings, but as I stared into the city I knew that it was like other cities of the war zone—desolate and dead but for the sinister life of enemies who had driven away the inhabitants. Here, when it was far behind the lines, the population stayed under German rule. Its ruined streets hold many tragic stories, and one of them is of a young English officer who was left behind in our retreat from Mons. He was in the Grande Place when the head of the first German column came in, and leaning up against a wall with a cigarette in his mouth and a rifle at his shoulder he fired several shots at them, as the story was told me by a French lady who saw it from a window on the other side. This young man preferred death to surrender, and he had his wish after firing those shots. They brought up a machine-gun, and he fell under a hose of bullets. More than three years have passed since then, and they have been filled with the growth and power of the British Army, and down its streets have poured a tide of wounded from the fire of our guns. The new line we are holding south of St.-Quentin has so far been very quiet, and the enemy has been defending his positions here by old territorial troops, not good for active warfare. But out of that quietude perhaps before this article is printed may come a fury of assault, for in that wooded country behind and under the cover of the hills the enemy has been preparing evil things.

FEBRUARY 24

THE enemy's artillery was rather more active yesterday on various sectors of our front than during recent weeks. His guns were busy on the Flanders front, where in the morning he attempted a raid near Passchendaele, round Hill 70, and Lens, where other raiders came out with no success on each side of the valley of the Scarpe, where I watched his

shells bursting about Monchy and on our ground above Gavrelle and southwards by the Flesquières Ridge and the country below Cambrai. It seemed to me that many of these scattered shots on each side of the Scarpe Valley were for ranging purposes, and to get the variation of the wind. German gunners fired a number of woolly bears, a mixture of high explosive and shrapnel, which makes a big black smudge of smoke, and they burst so high that they had no deadly effect. All this shooting has no unusual significance. It is not for the beginning of the great offensive, and is only gun practice for harassing fire. In some of the trenches opposite us are poor troops not yet replaced by those lions who have been fed up for the fight and trained in offensive tactics by intensive culture 100 miles or so behind the lines. Poor troops and weary of the war and miserable in *moral*—some of them who became our prisoners the other day had more than a touch of Polish blood. They were glad to be taken in a raid and brought safely to our lines.

An officer I know spoke to them in German, and after some questions asked them whether the Kaiser was still popular among the German troops. They shrugged their shoulders and said, "We have no great love for him; we love our wives and children and our little farms, and we want the war to finish so that we can go back to them."

From the utterances of prisoners one may know something of the mentality of the enemy who lives on the other side of the way and the changing moods that pass down his trenches as the winds of war blow by with rumours and hopes and false promises and whispers of revolt. But sometimes out of the silence that reigns in No Man's Land and the hidden life of the enemy beyond there comes a message or a sign that reveals the latest emotion of those men. So it was a few days ago when, stuck up between the trenches, our sentries saw at dawn a big board with some English words scrawled in large white letters. It was a message of taunting and mock pity. "Peace with Ukraine,"

said the words, "Hard luck on Tommy," and then in the last line, "Poor old Tommy."

Poor old Tommy grinned at this notice-board, and crawled out to it and brought it back as a trophy. It is "poor old Fritz" that is the cause of the same sentiment of condolence among our men when they talk of a German offensive. If he tries to attack us here, they say, he will "come up against a snag. He will get it straight in the neck."

I have been a good deal up and down the lines lately, and from north to south, wherever I have been, I have heard not only officers, but men, express perfect conviction that if the enemy tries to get through on their particular sector he will be swept to pieces. That this is the belief of men who have no illusions, who have no dust in their eyes but that of the battlefields, and who will have to resist whatever assault may come, and endure the abomination of its shell-fire, should be reassuring to any over-anxious minds. Our armies believe that however powerful the enemy's attack may be we are now strong enough in defence to prevent any big drive through. At the best they could only gain portions of ground in advance of our main defences, and in doing so they would pay a fearful price.

Meanwhile it is certain that the enemy is preparing to bring Tanks into action. We knew some time ago that he was training some of his troops to attack behind them, and some of our observers have seen a Tank behind the enemy's lines. It was lumbering around with a body of German infantry on each side of it. This year may see Tanks against Tanks, and many curious alterations in tactics resulting from this moving machine-gun emplacement; but we have a long start in experience and technique, and the advantage should be immensely on our side.

During these days and nights of war time there is incessant vigilance in our lines for anything that may come in the dawn. Always the enemy's lines are being watched,

and in spite of the big, dull boredom of the battlefield, where nothing moves except the shell-tossed earth, I find a sense of drama in coming into one of our observation posts near the German trenches, among the boys who sit there with their telescopes, studying the section of the enemy's front as bacteriologists who gaze through a microscope at the life of a disease. They know every dead tree and every hummock of earth, and every bit of ruin within the field of their glass, and the enemy's working parties cannot take a scratch on the earth nor put out a coil of wire without attracting the notice of these peeping Toms.

A corporal lent me his glass yesterday and we stood side by side under a bit of concrete for head cover in a hole in the ground and watched the white wriggle of earth, which was the enemy's parapet, winding over the barren fields, and the row of tattered trees, which once I saw filled with red flame, when a thick wood was there, and the country which stretches away and away behind the enemy's lines, with never a human creature to be seen among its craters. There was a grey light everywhere, and the trenches and the trees and bits of ruined villages and piles of broken sand-bags and sunken roads, with dug-outs built into their banks, were all touched with this pale glamour and had a thousand tones of greyness between black and white. Behind our lines there was the same grey loneliness and a queer cave world where once were railway-lines, taking people from one little town to another, but where now are sand-bag walls and houses in the chalk like the dwellings of prehistoric earth men. They are our men who live there, boys who had rich dreams of life in their eyes before they came out to these battlefields, men who knew the fine and delicate things of a civilized world, lads who whistled down the streets of London when the lights were lit. Now they are in this desert of the battlefields, making their homes below ground, and hoping that direct hits will not spoil their evening meal.

MARCH 3

I WENT out into a world the other day where no shells, bursting high or bursting low, can have any effect upon our men who live there. No German barrage can "put the wind up," because in this world there is no wind. Visibility may be good or bad, but the enemy has no observation here, though he is on top all the time. I went out into No Man's Land beyond our lines, and was as safe as in the Strand at home, though only a few yards away from the enemy's outposts. For this world into which I went, leaving the blue of the sky and the noise of things that "go off" suddenly, was deep underground.

It is a place of long galleries, sixty feet below the outside earth, in which one may walk for hours and hours and not come to the end of them. I walked for hours and hours, and my guide, who knows these tunnels blindfold, pointed to the entrance of another gallery, and said, "That leads to another part of the Front, and would take another day to explore."

My guide was one of the officers of the Australian Tunnelling Company, which during the past two years has done a great part of the work in boring this subterranean system below some section of our battle-line. They are mostly miners from the goldfields of Western Australia—hard, tough fellows with a special code of their own as regards their ways of discipline and work, but experts at their job, and with all their pride in it and a courage which would frighten the devils of hell if they happened to meet in the dark. When they first came over with their plant the Germans were mining actively under our lines and blowing up our infantry in the trenches. It was the worst terror of war before poison gas came, and I used to pity our poor officers and men who knew, and hated to know, that the enemy was sapping his way under them, and that at any moment they might be buried in a crater or hurled sky high. It is many months now since the enemy's mining activities

[illegible] They were beaten out [illegible] Canadian, Australian, and New [illegible] the Germans back under- [illegible] blowing them up again and [illegible] them for the [illegible] regain part [illegible] The Australian tunnellers had [illegible] the lives of many men [illegible] hear him tamping or [illegible] three times his [illegible] they can do that [illegible] his galleries, and [illegible] the tunnel.

[illegible] Australian tunnellers with [illegible] The enemy [illegible] before they [illegible] The Germans knew now that [illegible] in honour of which [illegible] apart from their own [illegible] soldier of ours has lost his [illegible] challenged the enemy and [illegible]

[illegible] this subterranean [illegible] "The Time Machine," [illegible] fourth dimension [illegible] underground people, [illegible] engines and feels the touch [illegible] It was dark in the begin- [illegible] of the galleries running [illegible] fighting points, and men pressed against the chalk. They were furnished with wooden tables and sometimes there was the clank of steel hat against steel hat. Here and there for 500 yards or so the tunnel roof was so low that one had to walk half doubled, and even then hit one's head sharply against the timber props. A candle held by the man in front was the only light in the blackness. But presently the underground world became more

spacious and lightened. A tall man could walk upright, and long galleries were lit by bulbs of electric light. On each side of the galleries were rooms carved out of the chalk. They were furnished with wooden tables and benches, and the miners were playing cards there. A fuggy smell, and a dampish mist crept towards us, and my guide said, "There are a good many men hereabouts."

Through holes in the chalk walls I looked into caverns where men lay asleep in bunks. The voices of men, yawnings and hummings and whistlings came through chinks in the rock, to the silence of the galleries. Later on, after much more walking, there was a queer throbbing and whirring, and in a big vault was a power-house, with three electric engines providing the light of the galleries. Not far away was a room from which a fierce heat came and a smell of good food cooking. It was the kitchen, with big stoves and ovens, where meals were being cooked by sweltering men within a few yards of the front-line trenches. In a little while a big electric fan will blow a draught through the kitchen and take away the heat. In other rooms were field dressing-stations, and we came to a subway with trolley-lines, down which the wounded are brought from the battlefield up above, so that there is none of that stumbling and drooping and danger of death on the way, as when stretcher-bearers have to carry men over shell-cratered land and down narrow trenches under fire. The roofs of the tunnels were richly coloured with a reddish fungus, which hangs down like stalactites, and by a queer freak of life which persists by the stubborn desire of nature, some of the square planks used for propping up the galleries had sprouted, and there were little white shoots from these beams. We went deeper down and further forward. In one room men were listening like telephone operators, but the instrument in their ears tells stranger tales than those that travel along overhead wires. They were listening to the sounds of German life in other tunnels

like these, the sounds of men walking and talking and filling sand-bags and moving timber. The listeners are so expert that they can tell by the nature of the sounds exactly what the enemy is doing through a chalk wall seventy feet thick. Their knowledge of the enemy life is so exact by this means that when they captured some of his galleries they found them exactly as they had mapped them out beforehand by the indications of sound. Presently we went into one of the fighting points driven out beyond the lateral galleries. And my guide said, "Here we will be quiet, because we don't want the enemy to get suspicious. We are now out in No Man's Land."

It was a safe and pleasant way of wandering into No Man's Land. The war seemed a world away. It was only some hours later, after a good lunch with good fellows in the bowels of the earth, when we came up to the surface of the earth and saw the sky again and the dreary waste of the battlefield and heard the cry and crash of scattered shells that we remembered our whereabouts and this business above ground. The Australian tunnellers live below ground for the greater part of their life, and some of them have the pale look of men who are out of the light. In their spare time down below they play cards, and yarn of old days in the goldfields, and carve faces in the chalk, as one man had carved the face of Shakespeare—"Old Bill," as he called him—exactly like the Stratford bust. It is a strange life in this modern world below the fields of death, and there is a sinister purpose at the end of the tunnels, but these men, by their toil and courage, with picks and explosives and listening instruments, have saved the lives of many hundreds of British soldiers, and long after the war is finished this underground world of theirs will remain as a memorial of their splendid labour.

HOSTILE shelling is becoming more severe on several sectors of our front as far north as the Passchendaele Ridge, and southwards in the district of the Cambrai fighting. Last

night there was gas shelling of our positions round Havrincourt in that neighbourhood for four hours, starting from six o'clock, and the enemy flung a number of high-explosive shells along the roads. All this shows an activity somewhat beyond the normal of what we have experienced during the winter warfare, which has been unusually quiet, but it needs an expert to interpret the various signs and to co-ordinate them into an exact plan of the enemy's intentions or fears. We have those experts, and they know pretty well what the enemy is about. . . . Meanwhile the weather is improving, and there is the spirit of spring over the fields and in the woods. The bushes and young saplings are putting out their buds. The first daffodils are pushing up through last year's leaves, and green life is showing through the browns of winter. It is sad and horrible that beyond the sunlight and the singing birds and all this call to the blood of youth there should be the shadow of the powers that destroy. Over great tracts of ground the coming of spring will make but little difference to the look of things, for there is nothing there that has any life to grow again.

I have just been to those battlefields of ours northwards from Lens, round Hulluch and the old mining country beyond Mazingarbe and Nœux-les-Mines. In winter or summer the scenery here is the same—a wide, flat plain, quite treeless, because long ago the woods were cut down by shell-fire. with the white chalk thrown up from the long trenches tracing queer winding patterns over the darker earth, and here and there the steep grey sides of an old mine-crater, and everywhere as far as the eye can reach the tangled ruins of pit-heads and power-houses, with the iron of their machinery all twisted and rusted among the conical slagheaps which are the black hills of this most desolate land.

What does the coming of spring mean to a country which for nearly four years has been blasted beyond the power of resurrection until the earth below is turned over the ruin

[illegible] Round [illegible] are [illegible] part of the Front. [illegible] which [illegible] beginning of the [illegible] are where they were [illegible] went there after the Battle of Loos [illegible] and around them are the same [illegible] where in the early days of the war the French [illegible] garden to garden and wall to wall [illegible] fight in the [illegible], when the enemy fell through the floor upon them, and a French lieutenant used a marble [illegible] to knock out their brains. The village is not much more of a ruin than when I first saw it, though many shells have powdered its dust since then, and [illegible] farm, familiar to thousands of our soldiers who have lodged there, is the same huddle of broken walls pierced by monstrous holes into which the enemy still flings his shells.

When I passed a few hundred yards away the enemy was at it again, as always. He hates to leave any pile of bricks within range of his guns when he has once made good target practice. Our men in country like this date their reminiscences by the destruction of some landmark. One officer told me that he came to the line after the Tower Bridge at Loos had been "done in," and was surprised because I had seen it standing. And another remembered something that had happened before we knocked down Wingles Tower. I looked over into the German country up by Haisnes and Douvrin, and wondered what was going on in that silent landscape where there was no sign of life nor any movement except when the sunlight chased the shadows across the chalky slopes and into the black holes of ruined villages. Across all this country of French mine-fields odd shells from our guns and German guns went howling like banshees, and fountains of earth shot up where they burst.

IV

Raids and Reconnaissances

March 5

There is still nothing but raiding to record, but from the enemy's side and our own it is developing in intensity, so that hardly a sector of the line is immune from these alarums and excursions, and all along the Front the nights are spent in watching out for any rush that may come after sharp and sudden bombardment. It is a grim kind of warfare, requiring special qualities of character and training—the nerve power which enables a man to play a lone hand in a tight corner, the hunter's instinct of hearing, the sense of direction in darkness, and the cunning of attack. The volunteer is better than the pressed man, and practically all our raiders are volunteers, who ask for a share in the next man hunt.

An Australian officer told me yesterday that for the raid which he led opposite Warneton that night he paraded 130 of his men and asked if any of them would care to come along with him in that adventure. Only five of them did not care—married men with children. All the others were keen to go, and those chosen were trained beforehand for the job—intensive training—like athletes for a Marathon race.

I sat down with the officer and his mess-mates to a dish of tea, which one can always get in an Australian company, when they assembled after the raid of the night. They were a clean-cut, lithe-looking set of fellows, with a fine simplicity of speech and manners, a straight-talking, straight-thinking crowd, with a gift of quiet laughter. The officer who sat next to me had been a grazier on a big scale in Australia. He was not much different, I guess, from one of those young English knights who came riding out to France with Sir Walter Manny, when there were other

kinds of raids, six centuries ago. That was how he looked to me, with his tall, long-limbed figure, and a light of steel in his eyes. He had been gassed a little twice in two years of war out here, but never wounded in night raids and scouting. "No such luck," he said.

A friend of his had pushed a pen in a city office of Australia, but now was a hunter of men, and so keen a scout that he was going up last night to look at a raid in which he had no share, as a matter of interest. "And take care you don't get a whack in the belly-band," said the colonel in command.

A great man that colonel, and he ought to be put into a ballad like Sir Richard Grenville or Sir Francis Drake. He was a Scot from Australia, hard as oak, tough as oak, with an extraordinary winning smile under fierce eyebrows, and with a blood-curdling way of speech which hid, I am sure, as gentle a nature as ever killed an enemy and loved a friend. So are some men made. It was easy to see he loved this band of young lions under his command, and that they thought all the world of him and would do desperate things to get a word of praise from the "old man," as they called him. I looked down the line of these faces and felt sorry for the Germans in their sector. Outside were the men who had just come back from one of the night's raids. One of the officers with me laughed as he looked at them, and said, "You can't beat those boys. Look at them mouching around just as they do on their farms at home. They take everything as it comes and don't alter by a hair's-breadth, and carry on in this bloody war as though it were their normal way of life."

The signallers were going up for the next night's raid. In single file up a duck-board, with their steel hats aslant and squared jaws. One of them grinned as he passed, but the others were grave, with a look of importance.

In a hut nearby an Australian officer was interrogating men of the raid that had just been done. One by one they

came inside, with tousled hair and mud on their clothes, after an hour or two's sleep.

"Did you see any dead in the trench?" asked the officer, and the answer was, "Two, in the front-line trench." "How much dead?" asked the officer. "Oh, fresh," said the man, "killed by the barrage, I guess."

"Trenches bad?" was the next question. "Full of water," said the man. "Like to live in them?" "Should hate to," said the man. The questions were simple and direct. The answers were simple and direct. There was no gulf of etiquette or constraint between the officer and the men. They understood each other.

There were three raids done by the Australians the night before last and one last night, and the story of them shows the meaning of this night raiding and the things that happen. The place to be attacked in the most important raid was a system of trenches to the north of the River Lys, opposite the village of Warneton, which is in German hands, and across the La Basseville-Warneton road. The raiders moved up in the darkness to the point of assembly, and it was slow going and an anxious time for the officers during the wait for the moment to attack. The German rocket lights were rising and falling, and if the assembly were seen it would mean many casualties and certain failure. Two of these lights fell right into the middle of a party and made a white glare over them, so that the officers cursed beneath their breath and expected the worst. But the enemy did not see them, and nothing happened until, at nearly midnight, the bombardment started.

"It was a barrage of perfect accuracy, better than Messines," said one of the officers, "and the men were astoundingly close to it, but did not get hurt. Then they made their dash in small groups, which knew exactly what points they had to reach, all working together like a professional football team, with centre-forwards and half-backs covering the field of attack, insuring clean flanks, securing blocks in the

enemy's support trench to prevent the enemy coming up, and working down the communication trench from the front line to the support, and going straight to the strong points to knock out the machine-guns."

As soon as the dash was made rockets went up from the German lines, and everything was in a white light. The front trench was entered, and at a strong point on the right there was a sharp fight for a machine-gun. The enemy here got up on to the parapet, and as the Australians drew near hurled bombs at them. The Australians answered with bombs and rifle-fire, and captured the strong point with its machine-gun, and blew up the dug-outs. They cleaned up the front line, and came across several dead and one live man, a poor, trembling fellow of eighteen, who had been in the army for twelve months. Other parties worked up the communication trench, and came across a dug-out inhabited by the enemy. "Come out of it," they shouted, but the enemy would not come out. An explosive charge was put down the entrance, and now they will never come out. Here and there the mopping-up men met with resistance, but it was easily overpowered. In one dug-out they found a quartermaster's stores, and in the support line two machine-guns, which they took back with them. Small parties of the enemy defended themselves with bombs, but none of the Australians was hit, and about fifty Germans were killed. An officer and four prisoners were taken at one point, and six men elsewhere. The officer wore the Iron Cross, but was in extreme fear, and small blame to him. All the trenches were in a bad state, and did not show signs of recent work.

Another Australian raid was carried out further north by Gapaard, and the men had to work round a crater full of water in the road which led up to the German line. South of this road the ground was very sloppy and the going slow, but there was no machine-gun fire against them, and they only found two men alive in this sector, both of them half

mad with fear. They were brought back as prisoners, and the Australians returned after a thorough search without a casualty.

A queer incident happened on this sector of the Front a few days ago. It began when the Germans tried to ambush one of our patrols working between two outposts, whose footsteps they could hear scrunching over the frozen puddles. The Australians retaliated for this attempt, and presently from a German outpost a Red Cross flag waved. No notice was taken at first, but after the sign had been repeated several times an Australian sergeant took off his tunic, in order not to show any shoulder badge, and walked out into No Man's Land towards the German flag. From that side came one of the enemy's ambulance men, a non-commissioned officer, who said that there were five wounded Germans in an outpost just out of sight below the slope. He wanted leave to fetch them in by daylight without being shot from our post opposite. This was allowed, and a message of thanks was thrown over afterwards. But the following day our outpost nearest to the place where the men had been wounded was blown out by gun-fire.

These are small incidents, happening often enough along the lines, but not officially recorded. They are of no great importance in the vast scale of the war, but they reveal, more perhaps than big battles, the human nature of the soldiers on both sides of the line, because they are more individual. It is a human nature full of strange contradictions and eccentricities of character.

One of the prisoners brought down yesterday morning was distressed lest he should lose a charm he wore round his neck. He explained that it made him proof against shell-fire, bombs, rifle grenades, bayonets, and butt-ends. He had found it very useful in this war, and as a proof of its virtues pointed to himself, as a prisoner safe until the war shall end.

MARCH 10

UP to this evening when I write, no further attacks by the enemy have followed his futile attempts to capture and hold our positions south of Houthulst Forest and on the Polderhoek Ridge, for which his troops fought very fiercely on Friday last, and all through Saturday night by Polderhoek. It would be curious to know what their battalion and divisional commanders think of the operations at this moment, when they are writing their reports of these actions, which have now died out into artillery retaliation and harassing fire, and when we have re-established our lines completely in both places, after most gallant fighting by our men. The net result for the enemy has been complete failure to hold a yard of ground, most severe losses in dead and wounded, and a revelation of incompetent command. Both attacks seem to have been botched by the commanders, who ordered their men forward into death-traps.

We now know that it was planned to make attacks on the morning of February 28 at Houthulst Forest and at Polderhoek, and both operations were probably schemed out on a bigger scale than actually was launched. They were frustrated on that date by the formidable barrages which our guns laid down, making the assembly of the German troops impossible and keeping their front and support lines under violent fire. The enemy's artillery replied heavily, and used gas shells in order to silence our batteries, but without the desired effect.

As far as the Polderhoek attack is concerned, it seems that the German officers in that sector got the impression that their plans had been revealed to us, because they paraded their men and told them that the attack had been postponed owing to information having reached us from deserters. It was not very cheering news for men about to come into the open against us, and they must have started with a moral handicap. Nevertheless they came forward in assault south-east of Houthulst Forest on Friday morning, at four o'clock, with an obstinate determination to

seize a salient which we held there. Their infantry movement was preceded by very violent gun-fire over our outposts and front-line system of trenches, which were lightly held, but in spite of this pounding of the ground, our machine-guns caught their advancing wave and broke it.

On the right the assault was checked, but on the left the German storm troops, armed with *flammenwerfer* or flame machines, which made a line of fire in front of them, debouched from the forest and succeeded in piercing our outpost positions. The party who established themselves here numbered about 300, and they brought up machine-guns and large supplies of bombs in order to resist our counter-attacks, which they knew would follow quickly.

The English troops who made the first attempt to dislodge the intruders were reinforced later by the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, the Koylies, as they are called for short, who made a separate counter-attack with irresistible spirit. They advanced upon the enemy cheering and shouting, and the Germans, who had shown considerable courage until then, seemed to lose their nerve and ran back part of the way without waiting for the Yorkshire lads to reach them. The Koylies followed them steadily and quickly, in spite of machine-gun and rifle fire, and the enemy's barrage, and drove them back further and did not halt until they had restored our line and got beyond the original German outposts. Meanwhile on this Friday morning down at Polderhoek there was no infantry movement and only heavy harassing fire from German guns along the Ypres-Menin road and the neighbouring battlefield. It was not until six o'clock on Friday evening that the German troops of the 18th Reserve Division were sent forward on a narrow front in order to seize the nose-shaped spur of the Polderhoek Ridge. The preceding barrage-fire was extremely heavy, smashing up the ground and girdling the ridge with shell splinters, and under cover of this the German storm troops obtained a lodging in a trench on the northern edge of the ridge where they main-

tained their position through the evening and part of the night with bombs and machine-guns.

It was the Royal Fusiliers who made the first counter-attacks against them, and there was some fierce bomb fighting at close quarters, in which the Fusiliers behaved with great gallantry. Trench-mortars were brought into action by our troops, and they must have caused many casualties in the enemy's position.

The King's Royal Rifles made the final counter-attack which drove the enemy out before dawn yesterday morning. They advanced with a most determined courage, and the enemy broke and retired before them, leaving their dead. By an early hour on Saturday morning we had gained back everything which the German storm troops had seized in their first rush. The assaults were not repeated, and the gradual quieting down of the enemy's artillery was a confession of failure. Some of our officers had a narrow escape from death. They belonged to a company headquarters, and the dug-out was broken by three direct hits of large shells, so that the head-cover collapsed on top of them and they were entombed. The rescue parties who dug them out did not expect to find one of them alive, but when they opened a way they found them all unhurt except for shocks and bruises. So ends the brief record of the German assaults. It was a wretched, futile business as far as the enemy is concerned. It was apparently not planned on a big scale, and had only a limited objective; but the complete failure of these two attacks are encouraging to us, and show that the German troops are not better men now than when it was our turn to attack, and that our men should be more than a match for them in defensive warfare as well as in assault.

MARCH 11

THE enemy's gun-fire is increasing in violence along some sectors of the Front, and he has been shelling heavily about Armentières, Neuve Chapelle, Fleurbaix, and other parts in

the centre of our line, but apart from a few raids on our outposts, no infantry action has followed his efforts, which were frustrated on Friday and Saturday at Houthulst Forest and Polderhoek. But his guns are tuning up, and the weather is so fine and bright that he may be tempted to take advantage of it. Our troops are on the alert all along the line, and send up warning rockets when there is any sign of movement in No Man's Land.

The S O S signal went up this morning south of Armentières, and our guns answered it with a protective barrage of intense fire, and so far the enemy has not left his trenches there.

A few days ago there was a similar incident south of St.-Quentin. The quietude of this part of the line was suddenly broken by red rockets flaming out above the folds of earth where both sides hold the outposts in view of the great cathedral, which rises like a mediæval castle through the morning mists and the evening shadow-world. Something had started the enemy, and his infantry were calling for the guns by firing clusters of fire-balls.

Further along the line a raid, or a German patrol party, seen crawling across No Man's Land, was the cause of signals going up in our lines, and the gunners on both sides saw the rockets, and messages were telephoned through to batteries and groups. The country was swept with fire, and for two hours there was a storm of shells from our guns and theirs. Then it died down, for no masses of field-grey men moved into the open, and no men in khaki went over the top. It was a false alarm on both sides, but showed the vigilance of the outposts and the power of the guns which lie low and say nothing for most days of the week.

I have been in that part of the line for two or three days, below St.-Quentin. Here, as all along the Front, every man is watching out for the least sign of attack, but I found among them a kind of incredulity that old Fritz should try any monkey tricks against their front, because of the natural strength of their positions and the completeness

of their defensive preparations. This country is so steeped in a slumberous peacefulness on these fine days of spring that it is hard to believe that on any morning a fury of gunfire should suddenly blast its slopes, and that out of the lifeless silence of the German lines, out of their still woods, and out of the ruined villages on the hill-sides, or in the valleys, waves of men should come to face the tattoo of our machine-guns. I walked through a copse on the edge of No Man's Land and looked through the twigs at the enemy's positions. Nothing stirred there. In the light of the afternoon sun the broken walls of the villages on the German side were as white as chalk, and there were two *mebus*, or pill-boxes, very clear against the black shadow of the trees behind them. Only a few guns were firing—theirs as well as ours. Machine-guns were chattering up in the blue where aeroplanes were on the wing, and German "Archies" fired at them, and the report of the small shells went echoing down the valley of the Oise, like the twanging of deep harp strings. But the silence was intense between these noises of things "going off," and into the silence, quite close to me, there came the warbling of a thrush singing the spring song in the twilight, with merry little notes, without a heart-beat for the strife of men. A queer contrast on the edge of No Man's Land.

"Jolly perfect weather," said a young gunner officer, further up the line where, by walking up a slope, one can see the white cliff-like walls of the St.-Quentin Cathedral, very ghostly and insubstantial through the haze of the day. I think the spring song was in this fellow's heart, also, as he sat in the doorway of his hut, looking out to his gun-pits.

"Not a bad spot, this," he said, letting his eyes wander round the pastoral scene.

It is a spot well within range of the German guns, and in the event of a German attack it is the duty of this young officer to do what he calls "the V.C. stunt" by keeping his battery in action until he can see the whites of his enemy's

eyes. But he was not worrying about that. The sun was shining, and it was a topping day, and good to be alive. He had a gramophone in his hut, and we listened to a piece by Kriesler and a 'cello solo by some one else, and a little ragtime to bring us down to earth again. The enemy was within short range, and he might attack in the morning, but it was a very good gramophone, and music is like water to parched souls. All along the line our men are like that gunner officer. They are keeping a sharp look-out, but they are not worrying before it is time to worry, and they are confident—as this gunner and his brother officers are, and all the men I have lately met—that if the enemy makes a big attack he will be mowed down on his way, and will pay a frightful price for any gain of ground. It is in that spirit that our armies wait.

MARCH 17

A WHOLE month of fine weather has gone by and the enemy's offensive operations have been limited to a number of small raids, a demonstration attack near Passchendaele which ended in disaster, and concentrations of fire with gas and high explosives on several sectors of our front. However, we still have full evidence of the enemy's plans as far as military preparations are concerned for attacks along our front. There is very little about the enemy's organization movement and work behind his lines which our armies do not know. The intelligence branch of our service has become extraordinary scientific, and day by day the military life and intentions of the enemy lie open to it like an open book written in cipher of which most of the code words are known. The enemy is afraid of this knowledge of ours for many things, and quite lately he has been staggered by the accuracy of our information which has discovered his plan before it could be carried out. What is not so easy to know is the political brain behind the military weapon, and until one knows the secret of that psychology one cannot tell exactly how far the plans of the German

army chiefs will be modified. It is probable that only three men in Germany have the controlling decision, and it is likely that those three are at the present moment torn by many doubts and fears, so that their decision is delayed and perplexed. Meanwhile there are many things as clear as sunlight from a military point of view. One thing is the gradual piling up by the enemy of his numbers in men and guns on this front, and all that that involves in work and movement behind his lines. Another thing is the spirit of his troops and of their quality in attack. That, I think, is a problem that must be causing grave disquietude to the German High Command. For it is very doubtful whether the main body of the German armies are equal to the moral strain of a prolonged attack on the Western Front. Not since the second Battle of Ypres have the Germans attempted a big attack against the British, and nothing but the bloody failure of Verdun against the French. For a year the enemy's High Command has had to adopt the system of using special storm troops, picked men of exceptional courage and training, to counter-attack during one of our battles, but in a big German offensive any hope of victory or defeat would depend upon the ordinary divisional troops and not on special bodies trained for assault. Many of those troops are the wreckage of divisions shattered by French and British gun-fire and sent to the Eastern Front for rest, and while there milked for more than a year of all their finest men as drafts for Flanders and Champagne. The residue left after that handling cannot be first class. We know that much of it is weak. It has been proved by our recent raids and by the failure of German attacks on a small scale that the troops engaged are utterly war weary and are extremely disinclined to fight.

These things must not be exaggerated. Germany still has good men, many strong fighting divisions, and many officers who believe that a successful offensive is possible. But for an offensive on a great scale the best divisions are

dependent on the weakest, and I am firmly convinced that in the mass attacks the enemy in the long run will be at the mercy of that weak and tired strain.

There is another thing which should give the German pause. It is the power of our defence and the spirit of our men. He knows a good deal about the power of our defence. Like ours, his intelligence service is scientific, and, in modern warfare, not many secrets may be kept. So he knows that we have defensive systems which will demand a great sacrifice of life before they can be overwhelmed. Of the fighting quality of our men he knows enough, not only from last year's fighting in Flanders, when all the luck of the weather and ground was against them, but from recent experience in raids and counter-attacks. But the enemy does not know as much as I do about the present spirit of our men, and I would like to tell him in all sincerity. I would like to tell him that our men, after a long rest from the terrific fighting of last year, are back to their best form again, and that from one end of the Front to the other they are awaiting a German offensive with an almost terrible conviction that they will smash it by great slaughter.

I am not writing "hot air," of which there has been far too much from time to time, but the sober truth as I have seen it along the lines during the last six weeks or so. It does not matter what sector of the Front one goes to, the officers and men all say the same thing. They are so certain that if the enemy comes over he will be mowed down in waves that they hesitate to believe that he will dare this adventure on their particular part of the Front. But it is the same on any part of the Front north and south of them, so that one cannot find one weak spot where there is doubt and anxiety.

These men of ours know that a German attack will not be an amusing game for them—that it will be preceded by very heavy fire, and that the fighting will be hard, but they

are utterly scornful of the idea that the Germans have a dog's chance of breaking through in depth.

"We shall smash him to hell," is their grim way of putting it, and they mean what they say.

This spirit of our men is amazing even to me, though I have known them since the war began its big battles. Their refusal to be worried before there is need to worry is an heroic thing which is better than the sound of trumpets along the roads of France. They turn the sharp edge of tragedy itself by the mock in their hearts, and by the vital way in which they enjoy the hour that is with them. They have made a game out of the foulest weapon in war, which is gas, and yesterday I wish Ludendorff had been standing by my side to see a mounted race with gas-masks, and how these English boys made sport behind the lines.

A number of London men had arranged a gymkhana near their camp, while waiting for what may happen; and there was good comedy and good sport on a perfect afternoon, with the usual orchestra of gun-fire in the background—but by luck no German aeroplane overhead to spoil the picture. The gas-mask race was done by about a score of fellows mounted on "hairies" from the Transport Service, whose hoofs were like thunder on the ground when they stretched out in a gallop, flinging the turf up behind them, and cheered on by crowds of London soldiers. The mounted men had to ride about a mile, then put on their masks, and at full gallop take a hurdle on their way to the winning-post. "There will be some casualties," said one of the officers before this event, and one's heart thumped at the sight of that wild rush of centaurs in a whirl of hair and hoofs. They put on their gas-masks in a second or two, as they rode, and looked like devils as they lay low over their horses' necks, with beast-like faces watching for the jump. Not a man fell, so far as I could see, and a wave of laughter followed them up the course. The scene was like a miniature Derby Day, and on every side I heard the good old Cockney accent, and the spirit of the great old

town in a holiday mood was there on this field within range and sound of the guns. The general and his staff were by the winning-post on a Service wagon. Other wagons were drawn up along the course, like the coaches at Epsom, and crowded with young officers. Refreshment tents were on the other side of the field, and one tent for "Palmistry and Love Philtres." Tommies of London Town played at being "bookies," and shouted out "Four to one on the field," or "Four to one bar one," when their officers rode out for a new race on their own horses and galloped down the straight. But laughter rang out loudest at the appearance of a sham general, with a fierce moustache and a yard of decorations across his breast and spurs as big as soup plates. He was mounted on a hairy mule, with long ears and a sad face, and followed by a comic mounted A.D.C. The real general returned his salute and laughed heartily.

MARCH 19

THE enemy is using an increasing quantity of gas shells, with the object of stupefying our gunners and spreading a zone of poison vapours over our camps near the line. It is an invisible menace, which puts all our men on the alert for any faint smell borne down the breeze or for the slightest whiff of fumes causing a smart to the eyes and skin. But our men are conscious of the danger and are trained to be ready instantly at all times and in all places with an unfailing safeguard. They work, sleep and eat with their gas-masks handy, no further away than their left hip, and practise wearing these things on and off duty, marching, running, and riding. These practises produce uncanny scenes along the roads and in the fields of war, so inhuman and fantastic that if any creature came from another planet and visited this Western Front and fell among a group of these masked men busy with mysterious labour above earth, in dwellings dug into the hill-sides or among the ruins of churches, mediæval mansions, and farmsteads smashed to matchwood, he would be terrified by the beast-like aspect

of the earth's inhabitants, and believe that they were evil monsters who had entered into possession of man's inheritance after the destruction of his civilization.

Our men make a game of the business—I described the race of the London men on the old hairies of the transport service—and I think they enjoy the hideous effects they make upon the passers-by. I passed a crowd of them yesterday, busy with the cleaning of a lorry column, and another crowd marching back from a bath, like a battalion of anthropoid apes, and some gun teams at artillery practice, with these goggles and nozzles hiding their humanity. It is a good joke to them, and they compete with each other in the length of time they can wear the mask and the physical exertions they do in it, but I confess the very sight of them puts the wind up my back hair by its frightfulness.

There are other queer-looking beings along the roads and in the fields, and truly this Western Front of ours and the country in its rear offer the most amazing pageant the world has ever seen. The Chinkies, who are road-mending and felling timber for us in some back areas, always fascinate me when I pass them. In the grey mists of the West the children of the sun keep smiling at the strange life and ways out here. A motor-car with a "brass hat" inside appeals to their simple sense of humour, and they laugh like anything when a tyre bursts. They stand and chuckle at a battalion of marching men going up to the Front with their packs on, and a whistling tune on their lips in time to the tramp of their feet. Some comical thought passes in their Oriental brains. To us they are picturesque fellows in their padded clothes of blue cloth and all sorts of odds and ends of hats, from the bowler to the cloth cap and the billycock.

On other roads in the rear are French Arabs, Senegalese, Annamites, and strange, soft-eyed fellows with long silky hair done up in a "bun," and black men from the African coasts. They are labour companies.

On the edge of the great desolation, among the wreck-

age of French villages and by the fallen masonry of ruined churches, yellow flowers are growing between the stones, and birds are beginning to build their nests in the shell-pierced walls. Red Cross flags wave above some of these collections of ruin, where numberless little wooden huts with semicircular roofs of iron—the famous Nissen hut, which has become one of the most familiar objects in the landscape of the war zone—have been fitted in between the broken wall and under the shelter of tattered trees. They are large flags which spread out in the breeze so that German airmen may see them if they like, and it seemed to me yesterday as I motored through a great tract of this war-swept land in the glamorous light of the setting sun, that they were like the banners outside the pavilions of mediæval knights, and that this Red Cross was the only sign of chivalry in this blasted country.

It is in the twilight, just before darkness, that these places become spiritualized by an unearthly atmosphere, so that one has a sense of ghosts about and realizes the world tragedy of this stricken landscape. For miles, and scores of miles, one travels through deserted battlefields, and there is not a village standing nor a house, but only the relics of old trenches and earthworks and wire entanglements and machine-gun posts, where thousands of men once fought in great slaughter and where other men now live in holes or huts.

An old woman was driving six lean cows across the battle-fields of the Somme as dusk fell yesterday, and there was no other living thing in sight where once our battalions went forward into great fire, and no sound where once I heard the tumult of tremendous bombardment. But all these fields were haunted for me by the spirits of our men who fought there. It seemed a long, long time ago. Behind the lines which are drawn far beyond those old battlefields north of Bapaume and east of Péronne there is the life of our armies now in being, and the pageantry of war

has shifted to that country, more remote from civilization because it has this great desolation behind it. There is no town which our men can reach to see the light in shop windows or get a meal in an inn. They are as cut off from those kindly things of life as though they were among the craters of the moon. But out there they have improvised a life of their own. Recreation huts and rest huts have been built near their camps. The cinema offers its thrill to them in a pavilion tent.

Officers' clubs have sprung up among the ruins of outlandish places in long, low huts neatly built, with a few pictures on the walls and some easy-chairs in the reading-room, and a good meal at a small price, with now and then a band to play in the soup and give a ragtime melody to the stewed steak and a piece of Mendelssohn with the spotted dog. In at least one town behind the Front there is an officers' club with little W.A.A.C.'s to wait, and an impressive company of staff officers with coloured armbands and many ribbons, so that the scene is like one from a grand opera on the war.

Up at the Front there is not this colour and splendour, but I like to watch our young officers come in straight from the line, yet very neat and clean after a wash and brush-up, and with a look of cheerful boredom with things in general and the war in particular, though they are as keen as mustard at their own job. There are officers from the good old English battalions with clean-cut English faces, and Highlanders and Australians and Canadians, and an American or two attached in some way to our forces, as a medico or an engineer, and French interpreters, and sometimes a visitor to the Front in "civvies," who gazes round at all this company of fighting men with eyes fresh to the drama of it, unconscious that all eyes are watching him furtively as a strange and wonderful being in clothes that belong to the dreams of men who sleep in dug-outs.

The men who go out of those officers' clubs to the guns

and the wagon-lines and the trenches and the observation posts and the battalion and brigade headquarters, live a good deal with dreams of the past or the future when this present shall be finished. I met a captain yesterday, a young Irishman, who dreams of the Blackwater river, near Lismore, in the South of Ireland, where he used to get salmon fishing, and of the time when once again he will go along its banks with a rod in his hand. Meanwhile he wants to know whether there is trout in the Somme or the Canche, so that he may have a little of the sport he loves best in the world when his battalion is resting behind the lines.

The Irish battalions are in good form again after their hard fighting in Flanders, and on the left of Bullecourt, where they took the Hindenburg tunnel trench in a quick attack. On St. Patrick's Day, two days ago, they wore shamrock in their caps, and the Irish pipers played to them, and the *padre* said "God save Ireland, and may there be peace there as well as here."

Yesterday I found a crowd of them gathered round to watch a boxing-match in a field which the Jerry boys, as they call the enemy, had once pounded with shells. Two honest Irishmen prepared to knock each other about in a spirit of brotherly love. The ring was in the open air, like a scene in the old prize-fighting days, and the seconds flapped towels into the faces of their champions and sprinkled their bodies with water according to the best traditions. It was a hard fight, not without a show of red blood from ears and noses, which aroused the laughter of the onlookers and seemed to amuse the pugilists, but after the fourth round the Game Chicken, who was a tough old bird, was hopelessly done, and his adversary, who was taller and longer in the reach, was more than his match.

"Time to end the fight," said the Irish brigadier. The referee agreed. The seconds came into the ring and threw up the sponge. The defeated man got most of the ap-

plause, as one finds in good sporting company, and called out a joke or two to his supporters to show he was none the worse for his hammering.

So our men make the best of life each day while they are waiting for the menace of death to speak from the quietude of the German lines—the most frightful menace that has ever threatened us.

PART III

THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE

I

The Storm Breaks

March 21

A German offensive against our front has begun. At about five o'clock this morning the enemy began an intense bombardment of our lines and batteries on a very wide front—something like sixty miles—from the country south of the Scarpe and to the west of Bullecourt in the neighbourhood of Croisilles, and as far south as our positions between St.-Quentin and our right flank on the Oise.

After several hours of this hurricane shelling, in which it is probable that a great deal of gas was used with the intention of creating a poison-gas atmosphere around our gunners and forward posts, the German infantry advanced and developed attacks against a number of strategical points.

Among the places against which they seem to have directed their chief efforts are Bullecourt—the scene of so much hard fighting last year by the Australians, Scottish, and London troops—Lagnicourt, and Noreuil (both west of Cambrai), where they once before penetrated our lines and were slaughtered in great numbers, the St.-Quentin Ridge, which was on the right of the Cambrai fighting, the two villages of Ronssoy and Hargicourt, south of the Cambrai salient, and the country south of St.-Quentin.

It is impossible to say yet how far the enemy will en-

deavour to follow up the initial movement of his troops over any ground he may gain in the first rush, or with what strength he will press forward his supporting divisions and fling his storm troops into the struggle. But the attack already appears to be on a formidable scale, with a vast amount of artillery and masses of men, and there is reason to believe that it is indeed the beginning of the great offensive advertised for so long a time and with such ferocious menaces by the enemy's agents in neutral countries. If so it is a bid for a decisive victory on the Western Front, at no matter what sacrifice, and with the fullest brutalities of every engine of war gathered together during months of preparation and liberated entirely for this front by the downfall of Russia. To-day I can give no details of the fighting, but will reserve all attempts to give a clear insight into the situation until my next message, when out of the hurricane of fire now spreading over sixty miles or more of the battlefields there will come certain knowledge of the fighting. At the moment there are only scraps of news from one part of the Front and another, unconfirmed rumours, reports of ground given or taken, and the vague tidings of men hard pressed, but holding out against repeated onslaughts. It would be a wicked, senseless thing to make use of these uncertain fragments from many sources, and some hours must pass before it becomes clear how much the enemy has gained by his first blow and how much he has failed to gain against the heroic resistance of our troops. The immediate endeavour of the enemy seems obvious. It is an enlargement of his strategical plan in the attack of November 30 against the lines we held after the first Cambrai battle, and it covers the same ground, on a much wider boundary. He appears to be assaulting both wings of the salient between the Scarpe and the south end of the Flesquières Ridge in order to cut off all the intervening ground, which includes Havrincourt Wood and Velu Wood, the line south of Morchies and Beaumetz, and a stretch of the country east and south-east of Bapaume,

down to St.-Quentin and the Oise, which he abandoned to us in his retreat last March after the battles of the Somme.

THE LINES OF RETREAT, MARCH 1918

By a rapid turning movement from both wings he would hope to capture many of our men and guns. It is a men-

ace which cannot be taken lightly, and at the present moment our troops are fighting not only for their own lives, but also for the fate of England and all our race.

During the last few weeks I have been along the sectors now involved in this battle, and have met the men who to-day are fighting to hold their lines against the enemy's storm troops under the fury of his fire. I have described the spirit of those men of ours, their confidence, their splendid faith, their quiet and cheerful courage, their lack of worry until this hour should come, the curious incredulity they had that the enemy would dare to attack them because of the strength of their positions, and of our great gun-power. But though many of them were incredulous of a great attack, they had been fully warned and fully trained, and were on the alert day and night. By labour that never ceased on the northern side of the battle front, they wired-in their positions with acres of wire and strengthened their defences and made their gun-positions, and wore their gas-masks so often and so long that it has become a habit with them.

His attack to-day has been no surprise, for it has been expected every day, though many people without evidence, the amateur critic and the arm-chair strategist, have professed to know that it was all bluff, without the same excuse of courage which made some of our men doubtful, though upon them would fall the brunt of it. It is not bluff, so far as to-day's battle shows, but appears to be the real thing in all its brutal force. Many thousands of our men are engaged in defence and counter-attack, and the one thing that should be certain is their supreme valour, whatever may happen. They will fight to the death to safeguard our lines, and whatever ground the enemy may take in his first assaults will have to be paid for by enormous sacrifice and held, if held at all, against counter-attacks which our men will make with most fierce and obstinate spirit.

The heart of all the people of our race must go out to

these battalions of boys upon whom our destiny depends, and who now, while I write, are making a wall with their bodies against the evil and the power of our enemy.

MARCH 22

THE enemy made no infantry attack last night, but heavy fighting is now being resumed after the lifting of the fog this morning, and our troops are heavily engaged on the right of our line near St.-Quentin.

The beginning of his offensive yesterday was on a colossal scale, not only in the width of his line of attack, which extended for fifty miles, apart from the area of gunfire, but in the numbers of his men and guns. He flung the full weight of a mighty army against us, closely crowded and in depth of supporting troops, who advanced in mass after mass. Nearly forty divisions have already been identified, and it is certain that many more have been engaged. In proportions of men we were enormously outnumbered, so that our troops have had extremely hard fighting, and for this reason the obstinacy of their resistance in many parts of the line is a wonderful feat, and shows how splendid is their courage and discipline under the fiercest ordeal which has ever faced British soldiers.

Nine German divisions were hurled against three of ours at one part of the line—the 34th, 59th, and 6th Divisions on each side of Bullecourt—while in another part two of our divisions—the 41st and 19th, between Quéant and Doignies—were attacked by eight of the enemy's. They were all German storm troops, among them the Guards, trained for many months past for this great assault. They were all, so our men tell me, in brand-new uniforms, as though they were entering the war zone for the first time, and they advanced over No Man's Land in dense masses which never faltered until they were shattered by our machine-gun fire, and they were followed by successive waves.

"They were like bees out of a hive," said a young soldier who saw them crossing the open country within 400

yards of him. "The more one shot down the more seemed to come." It was a return to the old methods of the German army in the early days of the war at Mons and La Cateau, and afterwards at Verdun. Indeed, it is surprising that the enemy has introduced no novelty of attack, no new frightfulness, no Tanks, no specially invented gas. He relied yesterday morning on the power of his artillery and the weight of his infantry assault. What wire was not cut by his guns was attacked by the snipers of his assault troops, standing in front of the wire, spaced by their officers, and mown down repeatedly by our fire. The supporting waves advanced over the bodies of their dead and wounded, and other masses came behind them, and the German commanders were ruthless in the way they sacrificed life in the hope of overwhelming our defence by sheer weight of numbers. They had an exceeding power in guns. Opposite three of our divisions they had 1000, and in most parts of the line one gun to every twelve or fifteen yards of front. In spite of the tremendous bombardments of this war nothing has ever been experienced by British troops like the length and width of the barrage laid down upon our defensive positions yesterday morning at five o'clock, and continued throughout the day without a pause, except to jump forward to let the infantry attack and the guns advance. Each battalion of Germans was provided with a heavy number of trench-mortars dug into their trenches, and it was with these that they did most of their wire cutting during a four hours' fire. At the same time they concentrated most of their heavy guns upon our battery positions, ammunition dumps, roads of communication, and villages in the back areas. They had brought up a number of long-range guns, probably naval guns from their Grand Fleet, and their shell-fire was scattered as far back as twenty-eight miles behind the lines.

It was during the last hour of the bombardment that they poured out gas shells, and they continued to concentrate gas about our batteries and reserve trenches through-

out the day, so that they filled the atmosphere with poisonous clouds. With this last weapon they failed to achieve the success for which they had hoped. Our men had been trained for many weeks, as I have described in other messages, to work for long stretches in their gas-masks, and this was of priceless help to them yesterday, when they were put to a supreme test of endurance. Many of our men had their masks on for hours, and fought in them. One man told me that his battalion on the left of the attack wore them from four o'clock in the morning until midday. Other men wore them for three and four hours at a stretch, and then were only relieved of them by being wounded and carried down behind the lines. Gunners also worked in them, carrying up ammunition to the batteries, laying the guns and firing with these nozzles over their mouths and noses, and these goggles on their eyes. It was an absolute proof of the efficacy of our box respirators. Very few men received the poison into their lungs and eyes, and there were only six cases this morning in one of our largest casualty clearing-stations which receives the wounded from a wide area. It is with deep thankfulness that this may be recorded, for the enemy's terrible prophecies of a gas which would penetrate our masks have been proved false.

The main object of the enemy's attack on the left of the battle-front against the 6th and 4th Corps was to bite off the Bullecourt salient and pierce through our three main lines of defence below Croisilles and St. Leger, and turn the line so that he could capture Henin Hill with his old Hindenburg tunnel trench. It seems to have been at three minutes past five exactly yesterday morning that his bombardment opened in depth with terrific storms of high explosives, followed by gas shelling. He put special concentrations of fire on the ruined villages of Croisilles, Ecoust, and other places in back areas. At 8.45 the enemy was reported to be forcing through our outpost lines, but he was driven out on the extreme left by an immediate

counter-attack by the 59th, 34th, and 6th Divisions. Later it was reported that masses of men were advancing to the left of Bullecourt, and our aviators, who were flying very low on account of the white mists which were rising from the ground like smoke, reported that they had seen our men standing to in their trenches, and the enemy thickly packed in the trenches to the north of Bullecourt. They never made ground on the extreme left by the old Hindenburg line, and a very gallant division of men drove them back when they attempted to cross No Man's Land, bombed them out when they entered a forward trench, and did not lose a foot of their ground.

A little to the right of them the Bullecourt salient was utterly smothered with fire and filled with flame and smoke and earth, like one vast volcano. No wire could stand that storm of explosives, and no man could hold such a position. In all parts of our line such a state of things had been to some extent foreseen, and our outposts—such of them as remained alive or uncaptured after the opening of the storm—were able to fall back upon battle positions to the rear, where there was a stronger defensive system, and time to rally for counter-attacks against the enemy, who had to come over the open under our fire with the great difficulty of bringing forward his guns. This was done wherever possible, the men retiring in good order and with magnificent courage, under the enemy's barrage, and when the enemy followed on, bringing forward his light artillery with the support lines of infantry, our guns slashed down his ranks and left masses of dead on the field. Our airmen all report that they have seen large numbers of German dead heaped up amidst the debris of our wire and in the open ground. But still they came on with a most fanatical courage of sacrifice, and when the first lines fell their places were filled up by others, and our guns and machine-gun fire could not kill them fast enough.

By about midday there had been hard fighting in or about the ruins of Bullecourt, Ecoust, and Noreuil. Early

in the afternoon the enemy were seen, to the number of about 3000, in a sunken road between Noreuil and Lagnicourt, and sheltered in deep shell-holes near those places which were once villages, but now, as you must understand, are merely barren sites on which only a few bricks stand. This meant that the troops holding part of the ground round Noreuil had been pushed back, and that after a strong and heroic defence the survivors had had to fall back towards the line of Beaumetz, Morchies, and Vaulx. At half-past five in the afternoon the enemy made another attack in massed formation, crowding down the slopes of the Sensee valley from Chérisy and Fontaine Wood, striking down to the north of Vaulx and trying to press forward all along this left line of the attack. Our gunners fired into them with open sights, cutting swathes in their ranks and checking their tide of assault. When darkness fell they had not as yet gained anything like the objectives marked out for them on their maps, as we know from those captured, and during the night they made no further attempt.

This morning there was fierce fighting round St. Leger, and our troops took some prisoners and four machine-guns. Up to the time I write I know of no further attack on this left side of the battle-front.

From Noreuil eastwards from Lagnicourt round the bend of the Cambrai salient the fighting was of the same intensity. The enemy by great sacrifices of life was able to penetrate our first defensive system in the neighbourhood of Lagnicourt, Boursies, and Hargicourt, against the 66th and 24th Divisions. A number of Tanks made a brilliant counter-attack before dark last evening and recaptured some ground near Doignies. The defence of our men on the Third Army Front was everywhere splendid, and the German High Command, flushed with victories over weaker troops on other fronts such as their easy victories in Russia, have been taught that on the Western Front they must

pay a frightful price for any gain of ground, however small and unavailing.

A specially heavy attack was made yesterday by six German divisions on one British division south of St.-Quentin. Here along the line of Itancourt, Barisis, and La Fère, on the Oise, we had the 14th, 18th, and 58th (London) Divisions; and north of the 14th (Light Infantry) Division was the 36th (Ulster) Division. Here the enemy penetrated our positions, and after desperate fighting the British line was withdrawn to the strong position behind the canal, between St.-Quentin and the Oise.

In spite of the extremely hard fighting yesterday, the spirit of our men remains good, and some of them are proud of their achievements in having checked the first onrush of this massed attack, upon which all German hopes were fastened. They know what lies ahead—fighting just as hard—but the supporting troops I saw to-day going up to the battle were chatting and smiling among themselves with a calm confidence which was wonderful to see. Their bands were playing them up as though on a day of festival, and none but those who know our men in bad times and good would have believed that these lads were going into the greatest struggle of the war.

The lightly wounded men have only one interest; it is to know how the day has gone, and when I told them that the British Army was still holding together, they said "Thank goodness for that."

They are all convinced that the enemy's losses are very great. "We were tired of killing them," said a gunner who had fired into their masses with open sights, and they hope that the enemy will break himself if he continues at the same rate of loss.

MARCH 23

THE enemy has been continuing his attacks all day along the whole of the battle-front, and has made further progress at various points, in spite of the heroic resistance of

our troops. Greatly outnumbered, owing to the enormous concentration of enemy divisions, constantly reinforced and passing through each other, so that fresh regiments may pursue the assaults, our men have been fighting bitterly for three days, and have inflicted severe losses at every part of the battle-line, so that where the enemy has advanced he has passed on through many of his own dead and wounded. But, in view of the enemy breaking through our defensive systems, our divisions have fallen back to new ground. They have done this under the continuous and increasing pressure of the enemy, and along many parts of the line their movement has been covered by rear-guard actions of most glorious heroism, small bodies of men sometimes sacrificing themselves to the last in order to gain time for their comrades, and though entirely surrounded in some cases by the German storm troops, have defended the redoubts and outposts for many hours, afterwards pouring out machine-gun fire upon the advancing waves and raking their ranks.

So it was yesterday round Henin Hill, for which the enemy fought with desperate obstinacy, sending forward column after column of men from Lagnicourt and Croisilles under the fire of our artillery, which slaughtered them in large numbers, and against those machine-gunners of ours on the hill and in neighbouring positions. Our infantry did wonders in defending this hill, which guards the way of the Scarpe Valley, and here, as I shall tell later, there was intense and prolonged fighting yesterday and to-day, in which our men withstood the repeated onslaughts of vast numbers, holding out and counter-attacking with an unconquerable spirit to death.

So it was also on the right and in the centre of our battle-front to-day, and since the beginning of those tremendous actions three mornings ago. Until now I have been able to tell very little about what has happened on the right, because the situation north and south of St.-Quentin was utterly vague and uncertain and in a state of confused move-

ment. To-day I have been on the right, and can now give a narrative of the southern part of the battle.

It began, as along the whole sweep of the battle, with six hours' bombardment and intense gas shelling of our batteries, and afterwards an attack was launched by overwhelming numbers of German storm troops. Our battle-line was held by some three divisions—the 61st, 30th, and 36th (Ulster)—from a point south of Pontruet to Itancourt, south of the St.-Quentin Canal. Along this sector the enemy line had been held before the attack by three divisions also, but the night before the battle they were reinforced until eight German divisions were massed there. They were ready for assault with eight divisions against eight battalions, one division against a battalion of ours on a front of some 2000 yards. I believe it is greater strength than has ever been brought into battle on such a narrow front during the whole of this war.

By the splendid work of our Intelligence Corps it was known that the attack was coming and that the enemy had assembled, and advantage was taken of this knowledge to pour a heavy fire over the enemy lines during the night and to sweep with gas the town of St.-Quentin, in which his troops were crowded. This, as we know from prisoners, caused him heavy casualties, though it did not suffice to break up his organization and plans. The position of some of our batteries was slightly changed to avoid the German bombardment at dawn, and this was effective, as the enemy poured a frightful fire of high explosives on to these emplacements, which were then empty. But a number of field-batteries were left in order to cover any withdrawal of our outpost line, and these heroic gunners served their batteries to the last, until the enemy had swept over them.

On this sector of the Front, north and south of St.-Quentin and opposite our line further south, the enemy's intention, as we know from prisoners, was to reach the line of the St.-Quentin Canal (or Crozat Canal as it is sometimes called) on the first day, and then advance in quick

stages westwards, the rate of progress to be eight miles on the first day, twelve on the second, and twenty on the third. In spite of their intense gun-fire of massed batteries, supported by Austrian howitzers and large numbers of heavy trench-mortars, the enemy plans were thwarted as far as this rapidity of progress was concerned. The heavy fog of the early morning on Thursday threw his assault troops at some points into wild confusion. His first line of assault—each division apparently advancing with two regiments in line, each with two battalions in line, with other strength of the division following in depth, with light machine-gun companies at intervals of 100 yards, and then heavy machine-guns and field artillery—sometimes became hopelessly mixed up with the third and fourth lines, while the right battalions were confused with their left battalions. This fog checked the pace of their onslaught for a time, but only for a time. The enemy's troops were utterly ignorant of the line. They were brought up in the night from a long distance behind, and even the officers had only sealed orders and a scrap of map marked with a green line, showing their objectives.

The German High Command relied entirely on weight of guns and man-power to break our resistance, and the driving power of the whole monstrous machine in movement. To this he does, indeed, owe the progress he has made. Our line was not strong enough to hold its old positions against such a tide. Our men served their guns and their rifles, but as attack followed attack, and column followed column, and their own losses increased, while the hours passed they were ordered to give ground and fall back, fighting those heroic rear-guard actions from one position to another.

The main attack just south of St.-Quentin was directed against Urvillers and Essigny, and the enemy forced his way through these places, between the 36th Ulster and 14th (Light Infantry) Divisions, by great drives. Our garrisons there were partly destroyed by his stupendous

gun-fire. He gained possession of Essigny before midday on March 21, and captured Contescourt on the edge of the canal. This gave him important high ground, of which he made full use. He succeeded by this movement in breaking our line at the right flank of the Ulster Division, north of the canal, which he crossed hereabouts, and by advancing his field artillery was able to bombard the line to which the main body of our troops had been withdrawn down from Maissemy and Holnon Wood to Savy and Roupy. He pressed forward against this line, but meanwhile several detached companies of our men were holding out in redoubts entirely surrounded by the enemy. They were defended by machine-guns, and had supplies of food for forty-eight hours. In one near St.-Quentin, in another near Grugies, and many others southwards past Fort de Liez to La Fère, these companies of men, English and Irish, Buffs at Fort Vendheuil, and men of the 2nd London Regiment in the keep at La Fère, held out, saw the enemy streaming past them, knew that they were cut off, but would not retreat. Some of them maintained their fire till evening, and then, with machine-gun ammunition spent, or nearly spent, tried to fight their way through. Many did not succeed in this heroic adventure, but by their service will always be remembered in our history. They checked the enemy progress, and gave their comrades a greater chance.

Later on in the first day of battle the enemy reached the village of Grand Seraucourt, and the high ground south of St.-Quentin Canal, which dominates positions on the other bank. He was fighting there all night and yesterday morning; his eight divisions, against our splendid hard-pressed three, were supported by still two more. The main enemy attack was between Roupy and the canal, and all day yesterday the German attack continued, our men fighting ceaselessly. The enemy forced his way past the villages of Artemps and St.-Simon in desperate endeavours to gain the canal crossings, and about midday yesterday

directed a column against Tugny, east of Ham, to capture the bridgehead. Meanwhile, further north the security of our three divisions on this sector was threatened by an enemy advance on their left, and it was decided to withdraw to a line further back.

One brigade of the 20th Division was sent up to hold the bridgehead at Tugny, and two other units of the same division were sent forward to cover our divisions as they fell back. They did this with glorious gallantry, and late last night those of their number who had been acting as the last rear-guards made their way back after many hours of battle. One body of troops from the 61st Division counter-attacked with marvellous spirit, and regained the village of Villecholles, and could have held it for a long time had they not been ordered to conform to the general movement. All through to-day (Saturday) the enemy pressed forward towards our battle-line, and it is reported that his cavalry have been seen on roads north-east of Ham.

The town of Ham, through which I have passed several times lately on the way to the lines in all this country through which the enemy is fighting, was evacuated yesterday of all civilians. Not one of them would risk falling into German hands a second time, for it was just a year ago that they were liberated from the enemy by his retreat.

On the southern sector of our front, between Itancourt and La Fère, were Londoners and Rifle Brigades and Surreys and Kents and men of the Home Counties, belonging to the 58th (London) and 18th Divisions. It was along that line of country, which I have described in recent articles, when I went to Fort de Liez and the woods about Barisis and looked across the marshes of the Oise to La Fère and Massif de St.-Gobain, and found everything quiet there.

"When is this battle going to begin?" said an officer of the London Regiment. That was nearly a month ago, and it began on Thursday morning. Opposite our line north

of the River Oise the enemy assembled four divisions. Then there came a gap where there are marshes, and south of that there was another division and three Jaeger battalions, and south of La Fère a Landwehr regiment. The enemy was so densely massed that there was a division on about a kilometre of front. None of them were spread out on more than two kilometres a division, with a battalion for every 500 yards. There was no attack across the marshes, but the enemy struck at Moy, opposite Hamegicourt, on the Oise Canal, and then turned his effort on the north of Vendheuil to our line at Ly-Fontaine.

The German 47th Reserve Division started from La Fère and swung past Fargniers to the Fort of Liez, which stands on a small hill, with dismantled walls and strong underground shelters in which our London men used to sleep when in support.

It was the Jaeger battalion which attacked Quessy and Fargniers, south of that fort, and there was a raid by the 60th Landwehr Regiment over the marshes at La Fère. During the night they built four bridges and a dam over the river, and then fired a number of gas projectors, but our men saw them, shattered them with machine-gun and field-gun fire, so that they had to be withdrawn. It was only a small episode in a larger plan. German storm troops were able to force their way to Vendheuil, Ly-Fontaine, and Benay, south of Essigny, and to strike against Jussy and Terguier on the St.-Quentin Canal. On the evening of the first day they brought up two more divisions, and that night, owing to the pressure of their attacks, it was decided that we should withdraw to a prepared line further west, which was our best defence. This was done during darkness, the retirement being covered by gallant rear-guards. All through the day several redoubts were held in front of our main battle-line by similar companies of brave men as those further north. A company of the Buffs held out in Fort Vendheuil until four o'clock in the afternoon, though entirely surrounded, and a company of

men of the 2nd London Regiment held out, opposite La Fère against all odds, with the enemy far ahead of them and with but slender hope of breaking through to our new line of defence. These rear-guard posts and the marvellous discipline and valour of all our infantry, who fought until their lines were weak and until many dead and wounded lay around them, prevented the enemy from getting beyond Essigny and Benay on the first day. It is probable, also, that the confusion into which he had been thrown by fog also hampered his movements, and it is certain that he was deeply distressed by the severity of his losses. Yesterday he renewed the attack, pressing forward wherever he could find a weak place, and making desperate efforts to gain crossings at Terguier and Jussy. There was fierce and bloody fighting at Jussy, where one of our brigades counter-attacked impetuously, hurling German troops out of that place, and killing many of them. However, the enemy was able to effect a crossing and so get to the left bank of the canal.

On the evening of yesterday—that is, Friday—the Germans brought up still another division, the 223rd, and these fresh troops did not relieve those engaged already, but leap-frogged, as it is called—that is, passed through them to new objectives. This morning they followed up our withdrawal by clearing up all the ground in the bend formed by the acute angle of the St.-Quentin Canal, which has its apex at Tugny, six kilometres east of Ham, and it was reported that patrols entered the town of Ham itself. Another report came through, though it proved to be untrue, that this morning the enemy troops were reported advancing in the neighbourhood of Ham to Guiscard. All the servants of a headquarters staff were gathered together, cooks and orderlies and transport men, and sent up the road to hold it. It proved unnecessary, as I know from personal experience, for I went into Guiscard this morning and met no Uhlans thereabouts, though they were reported, truly I believe, to have been seen round Ham.

On the second day of the battle I was at the point of liaison with the French troops, and I saw some of their regiments ready for action. It was a splendid thing to see the sky blue of this army. The *poilus* were magnificent-looking men, hard and bronzed, and in good spirit. Some of their officers discussed the situation with me, and said, "We shall hold them and give them a good biff when the time comes, as on the day of the Marne." They were anxious for news about the enemy's latest positions. They shook hands and saluted with comradely smiles, and said "Good luck to us both." "If we act together," said one of them, "we are bound to win."

French *poilus* watched our infantry and gunners, and all the turmoil of our traffic, with intense interest, and were surprised at the calm, cheerful way in which our men behaved in these hours of crisis.

"Your Tommies are imperturbable," said one of the French officers. Certainly, nothing in this war has been more splendid than the way in which, all along the line, many of our troops have fought every mile of their way back to the positions we now hold, under stupendous fire and tide after tide of those field-grey men pouring over the slopes and crowding down the roads.

I have told briefly what happened on the right of the battle. Further north, in the Cambrai salient, the defence by our troops was just as heroic, and in spite of inevitable withdrawal under incessant attack they held strong lines which the enemy has vainly tried to pierce, and are still holding to-day.

Southwards from Bullecourt the lines were held by the 6th and 51st (Highland) Divisions from Noreuil to Doignies; by the 17th, 63rd (Naval), and 47th (London) from Doignies to Gouzeaucourt; by the 66th and 24th from Gouzeaucourt to Maissemy; and by the 61st and 30th from Maissemy to the St.-Quentin Canal. Among the supporting troops who were sent forward to the help of these di-

visions were the 41st, 19th, 25th, 2nd, 50th, and 20th Divisions.

On the first day of the attack in the centre of the battle-front, the depth of the enemy bombardment was so great that it reached as far back as Vaux and Velu. We knew his attack was coming. Intense area shoots, which destroyed some of his batteries, blew up some of his dumps and caused him great losses. But he had brought up 110 new batteries, and had at least 700 guns on this short sector of the Front, so that his fire was violent and destructive.

Although on the right, fog confused the enemy, owing to the width of No Man's Land, further north it was in his favour, as our machine-guns in enfilade positions could not see his advancing infantry until they were quite close. It also veiled the attack from our forward observers. One of them telephoned to headquarters some time after the battle was launched. His words over the 'phone were dramatic as he saw the enemy draw near. Presently he said, "Enemy is streaming behind us," and his next message was, "I shan't be able to speak much longer." Then there was a crash, and after that silence.

The enemy's gun-fire with quick-time fuse destroyed much of our wire, and the rest was forced by sheer weight of human bodies. Our front and support lines were smashed into a chaos of earth, and German storm troops took them without much delay. They were lightly held, and the English and Scottish survivors fell back on the main battle-line.

The enemy's waves still came on, mown down by our machine-gunners at short range, and by our field artillery firing with open sights and laying their guns on to the ranks. Their dead and wounded were piled up in heaps, but this did not check for long the dense masses that followed for further sacrifice.

There was intense fighting round Lagnicourt and Demicourt, the last two villages on this line to hold out, and

the Highlanders of the 51st Division fought, as always in this war, with immortal heroism. When their flank on the left was exposed a battalion of Seaforths covered the withdrawal of the other troops, regardless of their own lives, against the hordes of the enemy. They held the position even when the enemy brought up two field-guns and fired into them at point-blank range. This last stand of the Seaforths enabled our men on the left to gain their defensive line, and only a few men came back after that deed of glorious endurance.

Heavy German attacks were launched all day against our reserve line in this sector, and dead were crowded upon dead before they could force our troops of the 40th and 59th Divisions to further withdrawal, first to Vaux, Merchies, and Beaumetz, and on Friday to the neighbourhood of the old German line. Yesterday there were strong attacks again, all along this line, but the enemy made no progress and bled his foremost troops to death against our defence.

There was continuous fighting in and out of the village of Mory all last night, as on the preceding days, the enemy endeavouring to get this place in order to drive down on the Arras-Bapaume road. This village of Mory was defended first by English troops—Staffords and Middlesex, Lincolns and Leicesters of the 59th Division—and afterwards by the Royal Scots Fusiliers, Highland Light infantry, and other Scottish troops. Mory was lost and retaken several times. The 1st Battalion of Leicesters were surrounded there, and fought their way out with extraordinary gallantry after severe losses. Afterwards the enemy was surrounded in the village and many killed, and last night Highlanders and Lowlanders swept through the village and recaptured the trenches east of it.

A company of Leicesters held Vaucelette Farm, near Epéhy, though entirely surrounded, and would not surrender, so that they were either killed or captured. Another battalion was surrounded at Pezières, and after fighting all

day and sweeping the enemy with machine-gun fire, made a gallant effort to fight their way through two lines of Germans. Some of them succeeded, and hacked their way back to our lines.

Meanwhile, on the left of the battle-line, between Monchy and Bullecourt, there was desperate fighting, the enemy flinging in new reserves and passing regiment through regiment to force his way forward at any cost. After taking Bullecourt and Croisilles on the first day, he directed the chief effort of his thrust against Henin Hill, with further attacks on Vaulx, Vraucourt, Beugnatre, and St.-Leger, against our hard-tried 40th Division. For all these places there were most bloody battles, and on the afternoon of Friday we were still holding Beugnatre sugar factory and Vaux-Vraucourt. At half-past four one of our staff officers walked through that village to see the situation himself, and found our men still there, refusing to surrender it, though the enemy was working round it and threatening to cut it off. At 5.50 there were more attacks, and the enemy made a supreme effort, so that all roads from Lagnicourt, Croisilles, and Fontaine Wood were crowded with his advancing columns. Our 3rd Division repulsed all attacks, but the 34th Division on the right, at Henin Hill, were compelled to withdraw, being too weak to attack further. Twelve machine-guns, with their teams, held the hill with a girdle of fire until the retirement was complete, though the enemy was swarming about its slopes like packs of wolves. Last night it was decided to withdraw from Monchy, and this movement was made without knowledge of the enemy, who did not discover it until three hours after the last man was away. There were no fewer than ten attacks yesterday against Vaux Vraucourt, and the enemy brought up his cavalry in case the line was pierced. But they could not break through, and there was great slaughter of men and horses by our machine-gunners.

MARCH 24

I HAVE further news to-day of what has happened on the right of our battle-front since I wrote the first part of this message. After breaking across the Oise and the canal of St.-Quentin, the German troops pressed on hard, in spite of frightful losses, and swamped several of the ruined villages, which they destroyed in their retreat from these places a year ago. East of Péronne there was violent fighting. In the neighbourhood of Ham they fought their way through some of the woods thereabout, and their advanced lines tried to force their way on towards the old positions held by them before they withdrew to St.-Quentin in the early days of last year. That is the position to-day, and after three days of most terrible slaughter they are now weakening in their power of attack, and slowing down the pace of their advance. All our men and their own prisoners agree that their losses have been on the highest scale, as high as 50 per cent. in some divisions, 75 per cent. in several battalions, and hardly less than 30 per cent. among any of the attacking units. One prisoner says that out of his company of 258 only 50 remain alive. We know of several cases like this, and they show clearly enough that the enemy has paid a stupendous price for his gain of ground. It is ground which he has himself laid waste with absolute destruction, and there is no cover for his men, and no standing towns in the battle area except at Ham, which is only half ruined. His men, sent out into the blue with two days' iron rations, are now hungry and exhausted and dazed by their long struggle against our heroic men. They say that the offensive was begun as an act of desperation because Germany must have peace, and in spite of their progress over a wide front, they are depressed because they do not see decisive victory. Their first day's battle enabled them, by storms of fire, to swamp and break through our first lines of defence, and on the second day they were able to maintain a heavy, though weaker fire on our positions, and pursue their advance by

weight of their enormous numbers of men, flung into the attack regardless of all price in life and blood. On the third day their gun-power weakened again, and their troops showed signs of great exhaustion. Since this morning they have been held, and have made no great progress.

It seems certain now that our armies are able to control the situation within the limits of ultimate safety, though our losses in men are inevitably severe, and the situation still requires all our abilities in strategy and generalship. Our armies are holding good lines, and the blackest shadows are beginning to lift. The weather is hot and brilliant in sunshine, and on this Palm Sunday there is a deep blue sky above all this blood and strife.

II

Heroic Rearguards

March 25

Yesterday the enemy continued his efforts to advance, and there was fierce fighting by his troops to gain the crossings over the Somme, south of Péronne, while at the same time trying to break a way through the defences of Bapaume. On the Somme he flung across a pontoon bridge and rafts, and his men tried to cross, but our field artillery, firing at short range, smashed up many of these bridges and killed his engineers and infantry. Gallant counter-attacks by some of our men flung him back across the river at several points, but elsewhere he held his crossings long enough to put over his forces.

This morning two fresh German divisions attacked along this part of the line south of Péronne, and our troops are heavily engaged with them and holding them back as best they can. All the fighting in this part of the country since March 21 has been a continuous battle, in which many of our divisions holding the front line below Gouzeaucourt to Maissemy have shown magnificent powers of endurance,

as, indeed, like all others engaged, and have only yielded ground under the pressure of overwhelming numbers and great gun-fire.

The Commander-in-Chief has mentioned specially the 24th Division for their defence of Le Verguier. Here, on the [illegible] day of the battle, a small body of the Queen's fou[illegible]ast man, refusing to retreat when surrounded, and [illegible] their machine-guns until they were put out of action. In their neighbourhood the Lancashire troops of the 66th Division held out stubbornly, and with their comrades of the 24th withstood the assault of seven German divisions, who surged against them on the first morning after the colossal bombardment, and continued to press them when they fell back from the front-line systems, fighting desperately with little battles in woods and ruined châteaux, such as Grandpriel Wood and Caubrières Château and Ferveque Farm, west of Hargicourt. The enemy directed his thrust against Templeux Guerard, gained high ground with observation, and fought forward through the village of Ervillers.

There was a bloody struggle in some old chalk quarries, where many German dead now lie, and after the enemy had come some way forward ten of our Tanks drove into him and shattered some of his battalions with their machine-gun fire, dispersing groups of his advancing units. The Tanks manœuvred about, firing continually on each flank, and causing terror among the enemy's foremost assault troops. Our men fought a number of rear-guard actions, and made many counter-attacks in the neighbourhood of Roisel, and fell back to the line of the Somme only when new masses of Germans passed through those battalions which they had met and beaten.

Our field artillery and heavy guns were handled with marvellous discipline in trying hours, and positions which became untenable. Our gunners were firing hour after hour at large bodies of Germans moving so close to them that they were laid directly on to their targets, and caused

deadly losses in these ranks of field-grey men, who never ceased to come forward in a living tide, at whatever cost of life, and bore down our defensive lines by this ceaseless tide. Some of our guns had to be abandoned, but many of them were withdrawn to the other side of the Somme, and the gunners were wonderful in the skill and courage with which they made this passage and took up fresh positions and went into action again, like exhibitions at Earl's Court.

By Saturday morning the German troops were exhausted and spent, and in some parts of the line made no further effort for a time, but halted to gain some sleep and wait for fresh rations. On Saturday and Sunday our men, who had had no rest from fighting, were reinforced and given some relief, though many of them were again engaged, and, weary as they were, put up new and gallant fights against the enemy, who had also been reinforced by greater numbers and came on again in their unending onslaught.

Some enemy cavalry were seen yesterday and to-day in small bodies acting as scouts, and our own cavalry patrols have met them and turned them back in the neighbourhood of Ham and on the edge of the old Somme battlefields.

French infantry is also fighting shoulder to shoulder with our men, and giving most gallant help to us. No praise is too high for the way in which they have been tried to the uttermost limits of human endurance and courage in face of tremendous odds. Many of them have fought isolated little battles and covered the general withdrawal of the line at the deliberate sacrifice of their own lives. All of them have fought hard though wearied by incessant fatigue, lack of sleep, and the killing of the enemy.

Our Army now in these battlefields are dirty, unshaven heroes, who snatch half an hour's sleep in any pause of the fighting, and then get their rifles and machine-guns ready for another bout. So I saw them this morning on the edge of the old battlefield of the Somme. It was a strange and

thrilling scene in country which for a time seemed liberated from this black evil of war, after many battles which seem old in history had been fought across it. It was country from which the Germans had been beaten back in retreat. There were our old deserted trenches, which Nature had filled with long grass and weeds, and shell-craters of old strife, in which wild flowers are growing, and shreds of barbed wire on the edge of belts of ground which had once been No Man's Land, and tumbled down dug-outs and sand-bag emplacements rotted by frost, and the debris of infernal conflict surrounding little cemeteries where sleep our dear remembered dead. Old British trenches and old German, were so mingled and upheaved that they could not be distinguished and on slopes and ridges were the thin gallows-trees of woods like Delville Wood and High Wood, in which our boys once fought under storms of fire which slashed through these riven trunks. The tide of battle had flowed away from these places to other fields. Now it had come back again, and this morning it was astonishing to me to stand there and see the bursting of shells again, and hear the high whinnying cry of heavies travelling over these ridges so long silent and abandoned, and the snarl of German shrapnel flinging its bullets over this mangled earth once more.

It was a battle scene of the old-fashioned kind as in the early days of the war, when there was open fighting. Down in the valley were our guns and patrols. Through the morning mists the sunlight gleamed on the flanks of the horses and on the steel hats of the men waiting for action there. Our 18-pounders were firing at some woods on the skyline, where the enemy was gathering, and their flashes winked in the folds of the slopes. Patrols moved out to establish contact with the enemy. I watched them go forward up the winding road, deserted of all other traffic. Some new batteries galloped up, unlimbered, and made ready for action. The men saw to the laying of their guns without hurry or nervousness, but with smart discipline.

Infantry were taking up positions among the old ruins. Some of them stood about in groups, smoking and chatting. After a cold night in the open they were still muffled up in scarves, tied up to the ears under the steel hats, and had the grey look of men without much sleep, and for once in a while the British Army was unshaven, and there were young faces covered with a four days' growth of beard, giving them a more veteran look.

The commanding officer of a battery came up and spoke a few cheerful words. He pointed to his guns, then to the slopes ahead, and said, "I shall catch 'em when they come down." Other officers came up and asked for the morning's news, or gave the latest they knew.

"The Germans seem tired," said one of them. "They're not coming on so fast. Doggo, I guess."

Another officer laughed at these words as though at some secret joke of his, and then said he was going as far as he could up the sinister road ahead to make a forward dressing-station. He was a doctor, but looked like a fighting soldier in his helmet and muddy clothes.

A line of Tanks came crawling over the hill like enormous slugs, moving very slowly—a good target for the enemy guns, though not a shot was fired at them. The enemy was not strong in guns in that forward outpost of his among the naked masts of wood on the hill-crest. Some of his shrapnel was bursting aimlessly, killing a few horses, whose dead bodies lay about; and presently he sent a number of high-explosive 5.9's, I think, into two patches of ground which were once villages—Montaufan and Mametz, but are now rubbish-heaps, and along the upper end of that sinister street which was ours at one end and his at the other. Some of these crumps set our transport moving. They galloped their old hairies down the road at a great pace.

From below the edge of the woods where the enemy was halted came a blast of machine-gun fire, sweeping in gusts of bullets. Our outposts were at work, and the enemy

was having a bad time, I think, in those woods. This scattered fire became heavier, as though some more guns of his were getting into action. The stage was set for another battle.

Far behind the lines there were scenes of great activity on the road—a long line of traffic, of marching men and guns, against which beats another line of pioneers, labour battalions, ambulances, and peasants' carts. German agents have been spreading alarmist rumours among the villages behind the lines, and some of the poor people there have been persuaded to leave their homes and trek away to districts more remote from war. As a contrast come battalions of "Chinkies" moving to new quarters and grinning as they go, in all manner of queer headgear, from pot-hats to generals' field caps, above their Chinese uniforms.

Forward go our marching men without a shadow on their faces, calm, resolute, undismayed by any rumour or bad luck. It is a pageant of heroic youth and our heart beats to see them. It is their bodies and their spirit which stand between us and a German victory. It is their courage which will break down the enemy's onslaught in what may be the second battle of the Somme.

MARCH 27

YESTERDAY and to-day the enemy has not made further advances on a big scale between the Arras-Bapaume road on the left of the battle-front and the village of Bray, on the Somme, but has paused in his massed attacks in order to reorganize his line and bring up his artillery. But he has made cautious movements forward over the old Somme battlefields, which have led to sharp fighting at various points, and renewed losses to his assault troops.

It has been marvellously clear weather since the first foggy morning of March 21, and though now much colder, with a strong easterly wind, which is painful to our troops at night in the open fields, our air squadrons have reconnoitred, bombed, and machine-gunned his massed bat-

talions with constant audacity. They have reported heavy concentrations of German storm troops behind Maurepas, Ginchy, and Beugnatre, and the roads around Bapaume have been crowded with men and guns and transport passing down through Le Sars, with German cavalry along the Bapaume-Guedecourt road, and a steady drift downwards to the town of Albert. That poor, stricken city of the golden Virgin, head downwards, with a babe in her outstretched arms, which I have described so often in accounts of the battles of the Somme in 1916, when that falling statue was lit up by shell-fire, was yesterday in the centre of the fighting north of the Somme. The night before their assault yesterday they bombed it heavily from the air, using the brilliant moonlight, which lay white over all battlefields and these roofs, to fly low and pick their targets wherever they saw men moving or horses tethered. In several cases it was not men they hit, but women and children, who when the war seemed to have passed from this place a year ago crept back to their homes and built little wooden booths in which they sold papers and picture post cards to our troops. Now suddenly war flamed over them again, and they were caught before they could escape by these thunderbolts out of that shining moonlight, terribly clear and revealing. Dead horses lay about the ruined streets when I passed through a morning ago. Our field-guns were passing below the outstretched arms of the Virgin, and companies of dusty, tired men of ours who took up positions beyond the town below shell-pierced walls and in sunken roads to await the enemy and make him pay the price of blood. Some refugees were leaving their homes, lingering to pack up a few bundles on barrows. Some of the children and old people were weeping, but I noticed that the young girls held themselves bravely, and smiled at our soldiers, as though to say, "We also are not afraid."

Yesterday afternoon the enemy, who had been working closer with his men and guns, in face of heavy machine-gun and artillery fire, opened a fairly heavy bombardment

on Albert and its neighbourhood. From the high ground this side of Albert our observers could see an enemy column coming over slopes south of the town by Meaulte, where, on July 1, 1916, I saw our Indian cavalry sitting like statues in the dark with their lances up, waiting for the opening signal of our great battle, which began when the vast mine-crater was blown at La Boiselle. That crater was now on fire again with flash of bursting shells, and the life of war had come back to these desolate fields, where for a long time there has been the silence of death above many graves.

To me nothing has been more startling in this war than to see this renewal of strife on these old abandoned battle-grounds, to see the enemy bombarding Fricourt and Mametz, to hear the savage sweep of machine-gun fire by Montauban and Delville Wood, and to watch our men lining the fire-step in the trenches that were dug for battles two years won or lost. Batteries I saw about the red-brick ruins of Albert caught the enemy in the open and tore gaps in his ranks, and our men poured rifle-fire at his advancing waves as they came over the slopes. During the night all our heavy guns in position flung high explosives over those Somme battlefields, whose earth has been more mauled by gun-fire than any ground in the world of war. The enemy's massed troops were here without shelter or cover of any kind, stretched on earth and sleeping if they could in the tearing cold wind. This bombardment of ours must have kept them awake, unless they were drunk with sleep, and many men must have been killed as they lay still under the high white moon. At the same time our flying raiders went out, flew very low, so that their wings were loud above the heads of the German bivouacs, and dropped bombs into their masses and spilt machine-gun fire over them, and knew by the turmoil and cries that they were hurting and demoralizing the enemy. The Germans retaliated in their own way by bombing open towns full of civilians, and I was in one of them last night, nor far

from the lines now, when these night bombers came over and dropped their engines of death. I have never seen such moonlight in March. It was like a June night in Southern France. Every roof was sharply defined by a silver edge of light, and the walls of old houses were dazzling white and their shadows very black. There seemed something devilish and cruel in that white light. Quite early in the evening bombs began to fall, and all about took cover, under shadows of old doorways. Raiders came over all through the night. This was in Amiens, under the great shadow of that cathedral, which in the moonlight looked as insubstantial as a dream, with all its pinnacles and buttresses white as snow.

The enemy now holds the line along the Ancre Valley, up past Beaumont Hamel, Serre, and Puisieux, to east of Ablainzeville to the Cojeul river by Boiry, past Henin and Heninel. South of that his line runs from Meaulte to the neighbourhood of Bray-on-the-Somme, and so southwards to Estrees.

There was hot fighting yesterday at different times of the day near Auchonvillers and in Hamel village, where the enemy tried to break a way through to Mesnil. This attack was beaten off, and our men made prisoners of two officers and eleven other ranks. One of his outposts pushed out to Aveluy Wood—how strange to write again the old and famous names in the first Somme battles—but were driven back with loss by one of our patrols. There was also an attack on the village of Sailly-le-Sec, but after seizing it the enemy was beaten out by a counter-attack. One of his air pilots was captured alive in his machine. As always happens in open warfare of this kind and at such a time, many rumours travel quickly down the roads, and yesterday was thick with them. It was reported that the enemy had broken through at a certain place with armoured cars, but our officers quickly took the situation in hand and found that the line was firmly held.

Elsewhere it was reported that the Germans had taken

Hebuterne, near Gommecourt, but a staff officer climbed a tree and saw that this also was a myth, and that Hebuterne and its old orchard, where strange birds went whining among the trees when I went there first three years ago, were still in our hands, and that no attack had been launched here.

All attacks about Ablainzeville and on our left flank have been repulsed with heroic steadiness. Up on this northern part of the battle they are now putting in divisions for the second time, those used in the first fighting, and that is a good sign. It indicates also that the main attack is pressing south of the Somme. The enemy's strength of attack does not seem so great for the time being as on the first three or four days, and there is no doubt from what prisoners say that his men are suffering under the strain and horror of their losses and fatigue. But the battles are by no means over, and this is only a pause before renewed assaults.

III

Arras to the Somme

March 28

After a short pause for reorganizing his divisions and bringing up guns and supplies, the enemy is again attacking at various points and seems to be preparing for new assaults in mass.

His main thrusts are directed now against Arras, north and south of the Scarpe, and from his positions immediately north of the Somme, where he is in villages this side of Bray and Cerisy, striking out towards Mericourt and Sailly-le-Sec. It is on the left bank of the battle-line, north of the River Scarpe, that his menace is for the moment greatest, and he seems to have side-slipped some of his force northwards in order to strike a heavy blow there, having failed to turn our left in the original attack, owing

to the splendid resistance of the 3rd Division and other English troops. This battle is now in progress, the fighting being very intense. Before the German infantry advanced, our lines from the village of Bailleul, near Oppy, southwards to Boiry, were under hurricane bombardments, starting at 5.50 this morning, and then German storm troops moved forward with many machine-guns.

Our artillery and rifle fire made a target of them, so that large numbers fell, but their gaps were filled up by succeeding waves, and they forced their way forward to some extent in the neighbourhood of Orange Hill, from which they were driven in the Battle of Arras in April of last year. There is also fierce fighting round Telegraph Hill, another point of vantage from which our men struggled in that battle a year ago. The enemy has brought up a number of high-velocity long-range guns in this district, and is bombarding villages and camps far behind our lines.

Yesterday he was feeling our strength by small actions at various points west of the Arras-Bapaume road, and this developed into serious engagements here and there. His object was to draw his line westwards and to gain high ground around the villages of Ayette, Bucquoy, and Puisieux, but although he compelled our troops to withdraw slightly, he did not make much progress. Counter-attacks by our men flung him back and strewed the ground with his dead and wounded, especially about the village of Ablainzeville, and this place is still held by us. In the late afternoon there was sharp attacks south-west of Boyelle, and after being repulsed with most bloody losses, the enemy tried to work round on either flank, but was again foiled with much hurt to himself. This fighting was, however, mainly to distract attention from more serious actions further north, which have developed, and are still in progress. Meanwhile, further south, on both sides of the Somme, the enemy is, as I have said, trying to press nearer to Amiens in the direction of Bray, and his outposts are at Morlancourt and Dernancourt.

There is one feature of his method of attack which is remarkable, and which shows the quality of his artillery officers. If he once gains a footing in any village or place of advantage for his guns, they rush forward with their light artillery and take up positions there regardless of being blown to pieces by our counter-battery work. So they did yesterday in Morlancourt, which we have kept under intense destructive fire.

I find it impossible to gain any definite figures about the enemy losses, because from prisoners' statements they vary very much, and all estimates are between 30 per cent. and 50 per cent. It seems to me certain, however, that in the first days of fighting the enemy paid a frightful price for his attacks. It was only after that first phase, when our foremost lines were utterly spent and tired by ceaseless rear-guard actions, that the enemy was able to advance more easily, picking up prisoners who were hardly able to walk, rounding up groups of men who had fallen with an irresistible craving for sleep, and cutting off small bodies who found themselves surrounded before they could think of escape. Even then there were always field-batteries firing at his advancing columns at short range, mowing his ranks as they came over the slopes of the Somme battle-fields, and covering parties of riflemen who swept the head of his column until their comrades had retired. And now, in the second phase of the battle, he is again losing large numbers of men, and in any close fighting he is roughly handled.

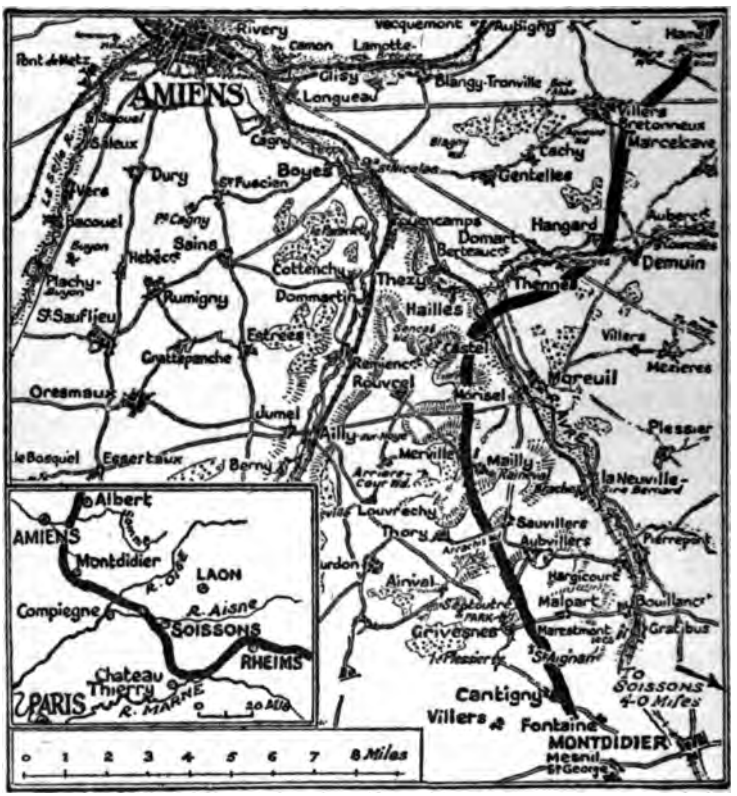
I have said much already about the magnificent courage of so many of our infantry and their endurance through these tragic days and nights, so resolute and so strong that they have kept in check the whole weight almost of the German army on the Western Front, apart from the divisions holding the quiet sectors of the line. No praise is too high for these English, Scottish, and Irish battalions of the 21st, 51st, 17th, 36th, 47th, 63rd, 18th, 14th, and other glorious divisions of ours, who, without rest or sleep,

for several days and nights, kept back this human avalanche.

But our gunners, also, are beyond all words of praise and gratitude, because of their unfailing endeavours. Many of their guns were overwhelmed a week ago in the wild storm of fire flung over our lines, but those who escaped from this monstrous bombardment have kept their batteries in action ever since. Officers and men of the gun teams have not spared themselves to protect the infantry and destroy the enemy. I have seen some of them in action during this fighting, and have marvelled at their coolness. At times their officers are hoarse with shouting the word "Fire!" and dazed for lack of sleep, but clear-headed enough to see an S O S signal and get a straight target. They saved nearly all our heavy guns, and have trudged back over battlefields over terrible broken ground between Bapaume and Albert and between places like Gouzeaucourt and Ham, urging on their slow-going caterpillars and encouraging the men. Our heavies are ready for more work again if ever there is a chance of fixed positions, and meanwhile our lighter guns are keeping up a chorus of fire along the whole sweep of the enemy's line. It is the fire maintained by these gunners of ours and by the wagon drivers who have brought up ammunition, so that there is always a heap of shells round every battery that has inflicted such fearful losses on the German troops, apart from the never-silent blast of machine-gun fire and rifle-fire of our infantry outposts.

The enemy has also suffered from attacks by our airmen, so sensational and destructive that the main roads have been cleared of his troops and they have been forced to take to the open country. I know many cases of airmen of ours who, during this battle, have gone out over the Bapaume-Albert road and other highways behind the German lines flying no higher than 500 feet and dropping bombs into masses of moving troops, and after scattering large columns chasing them with deadly machine-gun fire

and inflicting many casualties. This morning our airmen were flying like that over roads along the Somme from Bray, and it was they who brought back news of the new concentration for the attack which began to-day, after



THE GERMANS OUTSIDE AMIENS, MARCH 1918

flinging their challenge of death into these assemblies.

I must add to what I said yesterday about the divisions which have been in this fighting, though nothing that I could say would picture the splendour of these men, among whom I have been to-day. They are dog-tired and dirty,

and this morning a cruel east wind was cutting them after a night of intense cold in the line. They were unshaven, they had tied shawls round their heads under their steel hats, they were powdered with dust and chalk, but they held their heads high, and their limbs straightened up as their bands marched at the head of the columns. And in other fields and roads were bodies of men waiting to go into action or just out of battle, sleeping in every attitude of restfulness, with their heads on each other's shoulders, or hunched together for warmth, or with their faces covered by blankets and their hairy coats tucked up to their ears.

Endless columns of transport move along the roads between the guns and gun-wagons, and the drivers nod over their horses or their lorries, or sit awake on bundles of supplies with one arm round some dear, ridiculous little dog which belongs to almost every service wagon, and is the innocent comrade representing to these lads of ours the human side of life and its affections.

There is another crowd on the roads, pitiful but heroic. It is the crowd of refugees who are abandoning many villages now in the zone of war and many small towns on the edge of it, and fleeing from the approach of the enemy whom they fear more than cold and hunger, more than poverty and misery, more than the loss of everything that was theirs in the world. I saw the first tide of these poor people when the Germans came near to Ham and Péronne and Roye. Some of them had been once in the hands of the Germans, and at this second menace they left their homes and their fields and their shops and came trekking westwards and southwards. One's heart bleeds to see these refugees, and it is the most tragic aspect of these days. There were many old people among them, old women in black gowns and caps, who came hobbling very slowly down the highways of war, and old men with bent backs, who lean heavily on their gnarled sticks as the guns go by and the fighting men. I saw one old man near Ham

who was trundling along a wheelbarrow, and on this was spread a mattress, and on that was an old lady, his wife. She looked ninety years of age, with a white, wrinkled face, and she was fast asleep like a little child.

Many children are on the roads, packed tight into farm-carts, with household furniture and bundles of clothing and poultry and pigs and new-born lambs. The noise of gun-fire is behind them, and they move faster when it grows louder. They are very brave, these boys and girls and these old people. There is hardly any weeping or any look on their face of grudge against this unkind turn of fate. They seem to accept it with stoical resignation, with the most matter-of-fact courage, and their only answer to pity is a smile and the words: "C'est la guerre." Those are words I first heard in the early weeks of the war and hoped never to hear again.

Many of these people trek in family groups and gatherings of families from one village. Small boys and girls drag tired cows after them. The other day one of these cows leaned against every tree she passed and then sat down, and the girl with her looked round helplessly, not knowing now what to do. This morning I saw a girl wearing a veil and dressed in an elegant way taking a cow with her. She was quite alone on the road. It is queer and touching that most of these fugitives wear their best clothes, as though on a fête day. It is because they are clothes they want to save, and can only save by wearing them in their flight.

In one town the fear of the German entry came at night —a bright moonlight night into which there came many German bombing squadrons. The citizens had shut up their shops and stood about talking anxiously. Then fear and rumour spread among them, and all through the night there was an exodus of small families and solitary girls and comrades in misfortune stealing away like shadows from the homes they loved, from little fortunes or their shops, from all their normal life, into the open country,

where the moonlight lay white and cold on the fields. Behind them bombs were being dropped, and some of their houses were destroyed.

C'est la guerre.

MARCH 29

As I indicated yesterday, the enemy's pressure has for the time being relaxed a little across the Somme east of Corbie, and whatever effort he has made there during the past day and night has been repulsed with most heavy losses. I will tell later of that fighting, but yesterday the most exciting situation and fiercest struggle was on the left of our battle-line from Gavrelle southwards to below the Scarpe. It was a deliberate, resolute effort by the enemy to capture Arras. Three divisions of special storm troops—the 184th, 12th, and 26th Reserve—had been brought up for this purpose, though one of them had been engaged before and roughly handled, and the attack on Arras seems to have been postponed. They were ordered to take Arras yesterday at all costs, and before their advance a very heavy bombardment was flung over our lines from about five o'clock in the morning for several hours.

Men who were on our right in this fighting tell me that this gun-fire was not quite so heavy as on the morning of the 21st, but still of great intensity. It spread far behind our lines to back areas behind Arras in order to hinder the traffic on the roads and to keep back supporting troops.

Masses of men were seen by our airmen advancing down the Arras-Cambrai road and round by Monchy Hill. Their main thrust was towards Roeux, that frightful little village with its chemical works which I used to write about so much in April and May last, when Scottish battalions of the 15th Division and other men of ours fought in and out until all these ruins were littered with dead.

Once again yesterday it became shambles. We had machine-guns well placed with a wide field of fire, and as the Germans came down the slopes they were swept with

streams of bullets, which cut swathes in their formations. But once again, as on March 21, the enemy was reckless of life, theirs as well as ours, and always his tide of men ebbed forward, passing over dead and wounded and creeping forward like flowing water. Our field-guns raked them while our heavies pulled further back to avoid being blown up or captured. On and about Orange Hill and Telegraph Hill battalions of the 15th Division, who know this ground of old, fought tenaciously under murderous machine-gun fire, the enemy's screen of infantry covering machine-gun batteries, which were rushed forward very quickly, and took up positions in shell-holes and behind bits of broken wall and any kind of cover in ditches and sunken roads.

Their rifle-fire was weak (say our men, who believe themselves to be much stronger as riflemen), but the German machine-gunner is efficient, and their machine-guns are very numerous. At some points our men suffered severely from their fire, and in spite of most stubborn fighting, they were forced to give a little ground here and there. The line was firmly held in the village of Bailleul, a mere huddle of bricks as I saw it last below a line of tattered trees which lead to Oppy down to Fampoux on the Scarpe. There our line was somewhat bent back in the neighbourhood of Feuchy and Tilloy and Neuville-Vitasse, places which were taken by Scots and Londoners of the 15th and 56th Divisions in the Battle of Arras a year ago after fighting which will live for ever in history.

The footing gained by the enemy on a part of Orange Hill and Infantry Hill rendered it necessary to fall back yesterday towards the old German support lines before that battle in April of 1917. Our troops fought like tigers and would not retire until the pressure on them made it impossible to resist the continual thrust of new attacks by fresh troops. There were heroic actions by small groups of men struggling to hold up the front line, and some of them stayed so long after the enemy had broken beyond them

that they were cut off. Frightful fighting was happening not far from Neuville-Vitasse and Mercatel, and in this neighbourhood our men held out with wonderful determination until exhausted by battle and until only a poor remnant of men had strength to stand against these massed attacks. By the end of the day the enemy's assaults weakened, and then died out, because his losses were enormous and the spirit of his attack was broken by such stubborn resistance.

So far to-day the battle has not been resumed except by gun-fire, and the enemy is either disheartened at the price of the advance or is waiting for the arrival of fresh troops to resume his battering towards the gates of Arras, which were stormed in long ago by Attila and his Huns, and now again have them very near us. With all my heart I hope the enemy will not gain an entry into that old city, so ravaged by his shell-fire, but still beautiful with all its wounds. All French history has its ghosts there, from the time when Julius Cæsar made his home in it for a year until the Counts of Flanders and Artois and the Dukes of Burgundy filled it with pageantry and fine buildings and the songs of troubadours, and in the time of the great Revolution, the guillotine was set up in Theatre-Square and many heads fell beneath the knife. Our history, too, is bound up with Arras from early days, but to me and to all our soldiers its memory will be for ever haunted with those scenes a year ago, when our battalions had advanced to the edge of battlefields from which they drove back a great German army many miles. To-day the enemy is struggling towards his old line, and, in these wrecked trenches and amidst the litter of his old wire and wreckage and graves, there is bloody fighting once more.

South of Arras, along the line running down near the ruined villages of Ficheux, which is nothing but a name, and Ayette, which has some rubbish-heaps of brick, and Ablainzeville and Bucquoy, from which the German army retreated when it withdrew beyond Bapaume. There was

a series of attacks yesterday of minor character, though fierce affairs costing many lives. The Germans made a great effort to capture Ayette, and pierced to the south of the village, but were flung out by a sharp counter-attack.

Similar fights were in progress at Ablainzeville and Puisieux and Rossignol Wood, near Gommecourt, where I remember going out to our outposts when Gommecourt was delivered from the enemy in the days of good remembrance. To those of us who know these places it gives a sharp edge of regret to our knowledge that they are again under the evil spell of bloody strife.

The result of yesterday's fighting was proof that we are continuing to make the enemy pay a dreadful price for any advance, and that, though with his vast superiority in numbers, he may be able to thrust forward his line in places, he is never able to break our line entirely and in an overwhelming way. For our troops fall back when necessary in an orderly way, keeping in touch on their right and left under cover of dauntless rear-guards, and forming a new line, against which the enemy must struggle the next time, always with the vain hope of dividing our forces and rounding up large numbers of men.

Prisoners vary very much in their evidence about losses, some of them putting them as high as 50 per cent., others dropping as low as 30 per cent., but the evidence of our own troops and of our aviators, who fly over fields of dead, seems to prove beyond all doubt that the enemy has suffered appallingly. He is losing men in great numbers, not only in big battles like that round Arras yesterday, but in smaller engagements like those in the neighbourhood of Albert and up the valley of the Ancre, through Aveluy Wood past Ovillers and Thiepval.

Men who have been fighting here round Albert tell me that our batteries caught the German waves of men as they advanced down the slopes from La Boiselle and Montauban and shattered them as they came, but could not altogether stop those masses moving forward into their fire.

Men who were holding our lines round Albert on Tuesday night fell back to the outskirts of the town, that red-brick town of the falling Virgin, when the enemy streamed into the other end about five o'clock in the afternoon. Since then there has been much fighting at close quarters, extending northwards into Aveluy Wood. Some of our troops there have never had less than two attacks against them each day, and yesterday the Germans tried to rush Aveluy Wood and get to Martinsart; but they were flung back, leaving many killed and wounded among the trees. They managed to get a machine-gun along the railway to enfilade our men, but our own machine-guns have swept them night and day. Our field-guns also caught him here, and some of his troops could be seen running back in retreat to Ovillers. Five of our machine-guns, with gallant teams, went out 600 yards ahead of the infantry, and held the position here—quite isolated, but doing deadly work all through day and night.

There were at one period of the battle four German divisions here against one of ours. The German artillery is being brought up all along this part of the line down to Morlancourt and Cerisy, the country south of the Somme, and gun-fire is now more severe than after the first day of the great offensive. But the Somme battlefields make slow going for the heavy guns, and their state is not improved by the violent rains which fell last night, so that the enemy's gunners and transport drivers are struggling in the sticky ground over the shell-craters of a year's battles. South of the Somme our line has drawn back slightly near Proyart, in order to straighten out.

Many of our men are beyond all words magnificent—so steady in adversity, so long-enduring, so unmoved by any bad luck, so defiant of fatigue and the weakness of the flesh. Even when individual men can hardly walk their spirit is strong and keen. Though many battalions have suffered heavy losses in this long and fierce fighting, the survivors take their place in the firing-line and are ready

to meet the enemy again and punish him again and make him pay his toll fees of blood. Many of them have fought with martyrs' courage and have offered their lives up for their country in a spirit of heroic sacrifice. So was it with a body of men fighting yesterday near Neuville-Vitasse. They fought until only thirty men were left standing and not any officer. Somebody then took command and organized a new defence, and those thirty fought on until most of them had fallen and their leader was taken prisoner.

To-day I have been among our wounded, and although one's heart bled at the sight of so many fine lads all bloody and bandaged, the calm way in which they spoke of their ordeal, the quiet acceptance of their pain, the valour of their souls, stirred one with a sense of something divine in this humanity of ours, these simple boys of the English counties and of the Scottish hills and glens. There was never a man among them, though some were wounded mortally, who uttered a word of despair or anguish. In dark days as in bright days they take the fortune of war with fine soldierly courage. And men who have come out of the battle after days of incessant fighting, so weak that they can hardly stand, so dirty that they are almost unrecognizable, are restored as though by some magical drug after a night's sleep and wash and shave and change of kit. I passed many of them to-day, the heroes of these battles, and upon my faith they did not look as though they had suffered outrageous things and fought through an epic of war.

Our zone of war is a great moving drama of human traffic, like a nation of soldiers gathering for battles to decide the fate of empires, and though rain slashed down to-day, and horses and mules tramped through mud, and riders in steel hats had for once unshaven faces, and all the fields were filled with a litter of material of war, and everything from guns to forage was mixed up along the highways and drab under the weeping skies, it was a pageant of our race

which stirred one's soul with some emotion beyond words. For in this crisis, when we are at grips with the full power of the enemy, the faces of our boys who go passing by show no sign of stress, and even in all the turmoil there is order, and hardly a man loses his nerve or his temper. The best qualities of our race and breed are seen now, when they are most wanted, and that is the promise which gives good hope that, whatever happens, we shall not fail.

MARCH 31

WE now have knowledge that the attack on Arras was prepared on a scale of enormous strength by divisions in depth, preceded by a bombardment as great as that which fell upon any part of our line on the morning of March 21, and that the enemy had determined to capture, not only Arras itself, but the Vimy Ridge. It was the heroic resistance of our troops of the 56th (London) Division and the 15th (Scottish) Division that defeated this furious onslaught and destroyed, by enormous losses to German troops, this dark scheme of their High Command.

Seven German divisions were in position north of the Scarpe, and twelve south in the arc round our defence of Arras, and I believe their plan was for two divisions to capture the city, supported by others following close, while three divisions of storm troops were to rush through when our battalions were heavily engaged or overwhelmed, and seize the heights of Vimy. The brunt of this attack, preceded by colossal gun-fire, fell upon the London troops, and against these boys of ours from the old City at home German tides dashed and broke. By gun-fire, machine-gun fire, and rifle-fire the enemy's advancing waves of men were swept to pieces, and though they came on again and again this massacre continued until at last it must have sickened even the high German officers directing the operations from behind, and the attacks died out, and the night was quiet round Arras, while the enemy collected their wounded. It was an utter defeat which will, at least, check German

efforts round Arras, though they may be renewed with that ruthlessness of life, to achieve a settled purpose, which is one quality of German generalship.

Yesterday there was a number of violent engagements which were decided mainly in our favour, and sent more victims to German field hospitals. During the night of Friday enemy patrols apparently penetrated into the woods above Moreuil, on the River Avre, and yesterday some bodies of our cavalry moved forward to clear them out. They did this with skill and success, and held their ground. Somewhat later in the morning the Germans began an attack in the region between Marcelcave and Warfusee, across the high road from Amiens to St.-Quentin, after heavy gunning, which lasted about an hour. Our troops raked them with machine-gun fire and dispersed them. For a time they were quiet, but at 1.45, after two more hours of bombardment, they attacked again in greater strength, and again were beaten back with most bloody losses. In the morning also there were violent attacks on one side of Arras, and here once more the losses of the German assaulting division were so high that these regiments were almost destroyed. It was a fresh division just brought up to battle, but now, after a few hours, is broken up, and large numbers of dead lie outside Arras among those who fell two days ago. On this Easter Sunday, under bright sunshine, which is breaking through storm clouds, the fields of France are strewn with death. A year ago it was the same round the old city of Artois, for it was on Easter Sunday, April 9, that we began the Battle of Arras, and fought over that ground which is again our battle-field, and it was a great anthem of gun-fire which rose up to the sky on Easter Morn.

It would be unwise to exaggerate the enemy's losses, and I find it very difficult to get an exact idea of them, but it seems to me certain that since that Thursday morning when they launched their offensive ten days ago, they have reached figures so high that the enemy command must be

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deeply anxious as to the *moral* of their men and the outcome of this dreadful gamble with fate. In spite, too, of their progress over the old Somme battlefields, those barren and blasted slopes, where there is nothing worth capture and only one vast graveyard and one wide stretch of hideous lifelessness, they have failed so far in their ambitions and their plans. Their intention was to break our armies to bits by the enormous weight of their onslaught, and by piercing between the gap to cut off masses of troops, whole divisions and whole brigades, so that we should be utterly undone. In that they failed. Apart from all regrets at having had to fall back at all, and at having suffered losses for which there is mourning in our hearts because of so many splendid men of ours who have fallen on the field of honour—that terrible field of honour which will be watered with tears for all time—we may at least rejoice that by the skill of our fighting officers and steady courage of our men our line was brought back unbroken, and that all the way back to our present position the enemy was never able to strike through and roll up large forces. It is true that he has taken many prisoners, but they were the remnants of rear-guards and isolated bodies, and broken companies, not complete units or anything like a group of divisions divided from the rest of our Army.

Nothing in all this battle is finer than the way in which the 17th Division fought its way back to our present line of defence, while the march of the 63rd (Naval) Division in face of the enemy trying to pierce through on our flank was a thrilling episode. The 17th Division was made up of the 50th Brigade, composed of West Yorks, East Yorks, and Dorsets; the 51st Brigade of Borders, Sherwoods, and Lincolns; and the 52nd Brigade of Lancashire Fusiliers, West Ridings, the Manchesters, and Yorkshire and Lancashire Pioneers.

I have been among these men, and from the generals and officers heard the full narrative of those anxious hours. One battalion was holding the line in front of Hermies and

Havrincourt on the morning of the 21st, and, although under that frightful bombardment after dawn, only lost 150 yards of their trenches in the enemy's onrush with what might have seemed overpowering forces, but they did not overpower our men, who fought like Greek heroes. They counter-attacked the enemy and drove him out of the ground he had gained.

Hermies was attacked six times and Havrincourt seven times, but the enemy fell in heaps and could not break through. There was a sunken road at Demicourt from which the enemy deployed, and it became a ditch of death for the German storm troops. They were mown down by machine-guns and shrapnel again and again until that sunken road was heaped with their bodies laid out in rows. But enemy success elsewhere made it necessary for the 17th Division to withdraw towards Haplincourt and Bertincourt, and so to Villers-au-Flos. This was on the night of the 22nd, and by this time the enemy had taken Beaumetz and Velu Wood, seriously threatening the Division's flank. They were in danger of being surrounded. They blew up the lock of the canal, and rear-guards covered their withdrawal. They were isolated, and had the enemy between them and their friends, and had to hack their way through.

The guns were west of Bertincourt, and the enemy tried to rush them with machine-gun detachments, firing at short range, but after shattering the enemy waves they limbered up and got away to new positions. The 17th Division then concentrated at Barastre and dug in, and as its commander told me, the men were "quite happy" and not worrying. But the situation all round was serious. Other British troops on both flanks—the 51st and 47th Divisions—fighting against great odds, were hard pressed, and the enemy was trying to pierce their lines. The 63rd (Naval) unit, which had lost heavily in earlier bombardments before the battle, but had fought like tigers, had been ordered to pass through the 17th Division and take up a position near

Ytres. But the enemy forced a gap at Bus and Ytres, and pressed his men forward in the hope of striking through that gap and rolling up both these units.

On March 24 the position was grave, but it was then that our troops were most splendid and their generalship most skilful. The general commanding the Naval Division was always with his men in the firing-line and controlling every disposition, and in the morning he ordered the whole unit to form into columns and march in front of Bus, where the enemy was in strength, to Eaucourt L'Abbaye and High Wood. They marched in parade order, with perfect discipline, throwing out flanking guard with machine-guns, and so those men, weakened by many losses, but strong in spirit, went across the Somme battlefields, masses of the enemy on their flank, and it was a great sight under the sky, and one which should be pictured in history. On the way they found food in some of our stores and burnt huts at Le Transloy, the general setting light to them himself, and the men, who had been thirty-six days in the line, held themselves straight and whistled to the tramp of their feet.

Meanwhile the 17th Division was holding off the enemy, seriously menaced by that break through at Ytres. The enemy was advancing from Combles through Morval and Lesbœufs to Le Transloy, which was on the Division's road, at the same time piercing westwards from Ytres itself.

It was a race for Le Transloy. If the enemy got there first, all was lost.

The general manœuvred his men with fine skill as on a chessboard, withdrawing one portion and then another, turn and turn about, so that always the enemy was headed off, and these wolves could never reach the Naval Division, or break through the guard of the 17th.

Some pioneers of the Yorks and Lancs and the Royal Engineers were ordered to high ground to cover transport moving away, and they put up a great fight. The enemy

was shelling all the roads round Bapaume and Tilloy, and the transport had to gallop through this fire.

The 50th Brigade with the West Yorks, East Yorks, and Dorsets, was detached from the rest in order to strengthen the position by Guedecourt, where a third brigade was hard pressed and engaged in intense fighting, and did not reappear until the withdrawal was complete to our present line.

There was more hard fighting at Mametz Wood and Fricourt. So on March 26 the remainder of the 17th Division reached its journey's end, having fought a continual rear-guard action in which they punished the enemy again and again, and kept their line intact. It is as fine a feat as anything that has been done in this war. There was no rest for a time, and both the 51st and 52nd Brigades of the 17th Division, with the survivors of the Naval Division, were called to fight on the west bank of the Ancre above Albert, where other troops of the 12th Division, badly fatigued, were being heavily attacked.

Without murmur, these men who had fought down from Hermies and Havrincourt went to their aid. There was an hour in the night when the enemy looked like breaking through towards Martinsart, and the commander of the Naval Division, who was sleeping deeply, after many nights of sleeplessness, was awakened and told that the enemy was near. Machine-gun bullets were pattering on the roof of the hut while the general put on his boots, but a sharp counter-attack drove the enemy back in time.

Scots of the 51st Division also reached our final positions, not without losses, after fierce engagements, in which the Highland battalions fought in their old way, which put them first on the list of those whom the enemy most fears.

MARCH 30

AFTER heavy fighting around Arras, and minor engagements north and south of the Somme, the battle-front has quietened down at the time of writing, and there is one of

those lulls in which the enemy is reorganizing and developing new plans.

During the last day or two it is becoming evident that the German troops are beginning to lose some of the spirit which they had in the first advance, and are becoming depressed and anxious as to the future of their wild gamble for decisive victory. One day last week the enemy tried to rush Hebuterne, and gained a position in the cemetery, a most sinister place of opened graves and broken tombs, where he put seven machine-guns in position. Our troops determined to fling him out, and advanced upon the cemetery, but were checked at first by the tattoo of bullets from those deadly machines. They came back and reorganized, then swept through the village and charged the enemy's line, smashing it to pieces.

I am now allowed to say something about another branch of the Service which has had bad luck in this war, though always ready for action and eager to play the part which was theirs in the old days, prior to high explosives and machine-guns.

I mean the cavalry. Many cavalrymen have been holding sectors of the line as dismounted troops, and have been splendid in courage and endurance. But as mounted men also they have had a chance now and then, and have done a good deal of scouting in the old-fashioned way, especially on the right of our line, when the enemy was pushing out round Ham and Noyon.

It was here I saw them a few days ago, when the enemy was reported to be moving down from Ham to Guiscard, where I happened to be. Nearby a French regiment was bivouacked, after a long march to get to our relief, and all the villages and fields round about were flooded with the blue of French *poilus* who stood about trying to gather from English Tommies what was happening *là bas*. Suddenly there was a clatter of horses' hoofs, and a body of mounted men streamed through Guiscard. The sun gleamed upon their lances and steel hats, and they were

good to see. "Oh, for a horse to ride with them!" said a friend of mine; and something stirred in one's heart at the sight of those men going out on the great adventure. They took a ditch at the jump, and rode hard over open country towards the enemy. One strange little squadron of horse rode out in this way, and I think they were some I saw that day. They were signallers, batmen, and stragglers mounted and made into cavalry for a while. But with them went a queer detachment of infantry from a variety of different regiments, all under an ex-town major, and eight Lewis guns, with a battery of R.H.A. They were "some crowd," as their commanding officer said. They did most gallant work, and in the course of their adventures charged the enemy and took 150 prisoners.

Throughout these battles the Royal Horse Artillery has been magnificent, moving about in the open in front of the enemy, getting into action, firing into the German columns advancing on them, riding back, taking up new positions, and repeating their performance at short range upon massed bodies of troops shattered by this fire. Three batteries disappeared for three days, and seemed to have been lost in the blue. They reappeared in quite a different part of the line, having fought all the time in these rear-guard actions. It was touch and go several times. Sometimes there were gaps between our units, through which the enemy tried to break. But often the gaps were filled up at the psychological moment by heroic efforts. By constant rear-guard actions of stout fighting our withdrawal was covered.

IV

The Valour of the Men

April 1

The battle of which I have been trying to give a daily narrative has been on so vast a scale, filled with so many episodes of terrific adventure, and with so many hundreds of

thousands of men moving along its lines of fire, that I find it impossible to give the picture and emotion and spirit of it. We out here who knew that this thing was coming upon us, creeping nearer every day with its monstrous menace, held our breath and waited. When at last the thing broke it was more frightful in its loosing of overwhelming powers than even we had guessed. Since then all our armies have lived with intense understanding of the greatness of these days, of their meaning to the destiny of the world, and every private soldier or transport driver or linesman or labourer has been exalted by an emotion stronger than the effect of drugs. They do not say much, these men of ours, but there is a queer light in their eyes, shining out of faces greyed by sleeplessness, or streaked with blood. They laugh in the same old way at any joke on the road, and sometimes when shells are bursting close, as I heard gusts of laughter following crashes of high velocities about some groups of men a day or two ago.

They go marching up to the battle-line with unfaltering feet, their bands leading them on to the edge of its fire zone, and it is like a pageant as they pass, these long columns of men in steel hats, shouldering heavy packs, with their rifles slung and these miles long of transport, and these endless teams of mule drivers and wagon drivers, and streams of mounted men. As an onlooker I have been caught up in these tides for hundreds of kilometres from south to north, and the spirit of these armies on the move seems almost visible, as though all emotion in these men's hearts were vibrant about one. Men who have just moved up to hold the lines are hoping for an attack, so that they can smash more enemy divisions. Anger moves in them because the enemy threw us back in places by overwhelming odds. Now they swear he will be stopped and broken. Their own losses do not make them mournful. They wipe out of their minds for the time the horrors and tragedy they have seen. Fierce exultation at the destruction of the enemy, grim pride in repulsing his bloodiest attacks, reso-

[illegible] changed the [illegible] machine-gun [illegible] than I [illegible] passion [illegible] now [illegible] would [illegible] years of war would have been [illegible] experiment [illegible] masses [illegible] rear-guard action—according [illegible]

[illegible] some of those men of the [illegible] been fighting in the Battle of [illegible] received [illegible] There were the London regiments of the [illegible] amongst them, and their band was playing [illegible] amid the great glory of the gold- [illegible] after a day of storm. The colonel of [illegible] the London Rifle Brigade—came out [illegible] and wash and shave. All his kit had been [illegible] but he had borrowed a razor from his [illegible] would have guessed that this smiling [illegible] bright eyes and easy manners, had [illegible] where many of his men fell around [illegible] shelling, where he had been firing a [illegible] crowds of Germans and where he had [illegible] dead bodies as the enemy came [illegible] machine-gun bullets and [illegible] artillery. He spoke just a word or two [illegible] many of his best and bravest, [illegible] and told of their heroic defence and [illegible] of the enemy.

It was great slaughter in that Battle of Arras. From documents found on a German airman brought down in our lines it is now certain that the enemy had most ambitious objectives, including the capture of Arras and turning of Vimy Ridge. Two German divisions were holding the

line north of the Scarpe, from Gavrelle to Oppy, and three special shock divisions were assembled to pass through and turn the ridge from the south, while further south one division was to take the heights east of Arras, and a Guards division to take Arras itself.

After that, their objectives were indefinite. This battalion of the London Rifle Brigade were holding the foremost line by a system of posts in advance of the battle-line, among them Mill Post, Bradford Post, and Towie Post. The enemy began the battle by concentrating the bombardment on these while he gassed support-lines and field-artillery positions, and brought his barrage backwards and forwards over our main defences down there by Gavrelle and Bailleul and Oppy Wood, where one evening before March 21 I went to see some of these London lads, and saw those sinister ruins and broken trees which three days ago were smothered in the fury of fire. Most of the posts were blotted out. From one hard by the Westminsters, a small body of men surrounded by numbers of the enemy, fought their way back. An officer of the London Rifle Brigade, who has been out since the beginning of the war, says he never saw such an intense bombardment, and when it lifted the Germans came over in close formation, wave after wave. Behind them, at some distance, rode the company commanders on horses, and behind them field artillery. Each man carried a full pack and an extra pair of boots as for a long march, and rations for six days. They did not travel far; they were caught by machine-gun fire and literally mown down on the wire.

Our field-guns made targets of them and tore gaps in their waves. Some of them got into our front line, but the London Riflemen pulled down parts of their parapet, made blocks in their trench and kept them back by bombing and rifle-fire. An enemy battery was unlimbered, and German officers strolled up with sticks to point out gaps in our wire to their men and were shot down like rabbits. These London men fell back to the main defensive line a

short distance to the rear, and the enemy never penetrated this, though all day long he made fresh efforts from 9.45 in the morning till 7 in the evening. The London men lost many of their comrades in all those hours of bloody, costly fighting, but by heroic defence they foiled the enemy's most ambitious plan. Our machine-gunners say that they were sick of killing, and the colonel of the Rifle Bridage used 300 rounds, and each bullet found its mark.

London troops on the right of these bore the brunt of most formidable attacks on the same method as those above. Men of the 2nd Essex fought like demons, say their officers, in our foremost trenches, and one body of them sent back a message that they were going to fight to the death. They did, and not a man came back.

Some Scottish battalions of the 15th Division were hard pressed, and had to withdraw till nightfall to the second line through Fampoux. Since then, counter-attacks have restored a good deal of the ground.

All day long our aeroplanes reported concentrations of troops pouring down the Arras-Cambrai road and other routes of march, and the artillery had so many targets that they could hardly switch on to them fast enough. Enemy losses were fantastic in their horror. Meanwhile, on the right again, below the Cambrai road, our men were putting up that heroic stand which I have partly described in other messages. There the 3rd Division—that wonderful division which has fought with dogged courage all through the war—were holding the line from the Cambrai road to Fontaine Wood. They were not attacked on the 21st, but on the following day a big assault broke upon them and was repulsed after fierce fighting. The enemy worked round south past the 34th Division, but our Guards came up in support and killed many of them. On the night of the 22nd the 3rd Division moved to a line between Wancourt and Henin, and until the 28th broke attack after attack in spite of their own increasing losses which drained their strength until they were but a thin heroic line. They had

three German divisions and part of a fourth against them, and when at last they were relieved the survivors of this very gallant division of ours came out singing. Every battalion of the 3rd Division fought until they were but a remnant. The Suffolks on the Wancourt-Tilloy road fought the enemy both ways, back to back, with Germans on each side of them. Parties of Northumberland Fusiliers fought until all were killed or wounded. There was a battle of eight hours round battalion headquarters. Company commanders fought with rifles until they fell. Scottish Fusiliers at Henin gave ground slowly under enormous odds, and killed the enemy all the way back. One of our machine-gun batteries counted 400 German dead opposite their position. Round Neuville-Vitasse and Henin Hill the enemy bodies lie in heaps.

All through this battle in shelled areas behind, our traffic men were controlling roads, timing the arrival of shells and passing traffic through between those times. No troops have ever fought more bravely than these, and their names will be remembered with honour throughout our history when all this will seem like a mad, bad dream of a world in conflict.

Away from Arras, and down on the south of the line, a certain body of Canadians have been having some of the most astounding adventures in all this battle, and, fighting with valour and heroic audacity, leave one breathless. They are officers and men of a machine-gun detachment organized in the early days of war by a French-Canadian officer at the expense of himself and ten friends, and with waiting enthusiasm which looked forward to the day when they would be wanted for great service. That day came on March 21, and when I saw this French-Canadian officer yesterday, a tall, dark, quiet man, speaking with hidden emotion, he knew that his idea was justified, and that his officers and men had made good to the uttermost limits of gallant service. For ten days these cars have fought run-

ning fights with German patrols. They have engaged German cavalry and smashed them, checked enemy columns crossing bridges and pouring downwards, scattered large bodies of men surrounding ours, and in ten days of crowded life have destroyed many German storm troops and helped to hold up the tide of their advance. Their own losses have not been light, for these Canadians have been filled with grim passion, determined to die rather than yield to any odds, and when that happened they fought and died.

After the first call on March 21, and orders to move on the morning of the 22nd, eight cars were in action the same day, 100 kilometres away, after a night without sleep, and other detachments followed them quickly. Sometimes they fought mounted in these long, grey, open cars, which I saw early in the battle, wondering at them, and sometimes they fought dismounted, with their machine-guns on the ground. But always they fought through ten days and nights, with less than twenty hours' sleep all that time. These cars near Maricourt gathered together 150 men who had been cut off, and held the enemy at bay, covering the withdrawal of some of our heavy guns and Tanks. That time they fought dismounted, with their Vickers guns in front of barbed wire to get observation. The enemy's frontal attack was stopped, but he worked round the flanks, and a captain of an armoured-car battery ordered his men behind the wire. The enemy had to come through a narrow gap and was killed as he came. The Canadians had many casualties, and a captain's arm was torn away by an explosive bullet, and at last only a sergeant and two privates were left unwounded. One of them mounted a motor-cycle and brought back the cars and took back the wounded. Two cars found the enemy massing up the road, and their machine-guns enfiladed these field-grey men and killed them in large numbers.

Near La Motte they fought heavy bodies of German cavalry, killed a number, and put the rest to flight. They

have not been seen since. At Cerisy a battalion of Germans, 600 strong, was encountered at cross-roads by one car, which brought them to a standstill and dispersed them with heavy losses. There was a fierce action also round Villers-Carbonnel, where these armoured cars stopped a gap of 2500 yards under a Canadian officer, who was twice surrounded in villages crowded with Germans, and fought his way out. At the second time all the crew were killed except the driver, but the officer dismounted, took his gun, posted himself at the street corner, and fired on the attacking Germans until they were quite close, when he jumped into the car and drove away. One battery in action, dismounted, ran out of ammunition, but fought with bombs until these were spent, and then charged the enemy with their fists and empty revolvers and machine-gun barrels.

Everybody is ready to help these cars, and their crews carry their loads, for they know what terrible casualties they have caused the Huns. At times the enemy—like sheep without a shepherd—walk blindly into their guns only to be mown down. Everywhere they have been these Canadian armoured cars have helped to steady the line and give confidence to the infantry. They are the darlings of the troops, these grim fighting fellows, with jests on their lips and utterly reckless of life, so long as they kill Germans. One of their officers is called by the nickname of "Canada," and a shout of regret went up when it was learnt that he had been blown off his motor-bicycle by a shell-burst, and is now a casualty, though not seriously wounded. These cars have been in scores of fights, and one day their history must be fully written by one of their comrades. It is like a romance of boyhood written by Mayne Reid or James Grant, and one forgets the tragedy of all this blood and death which follows the wake of those cars because of the valour and hardihood and adventurous spirit of their officers and crews.

APRIL 2

OUR respite from massed attacks since the last Battle of Arras does not mean that the enemy has abandoned his ambitious plans to drive a wedge between the British and French armies, by making a breach in the lines between Amiens and Montdidier and straightening the line of his advance to avoid a dangerous salient by overwhelming our left flank north of Arras. It is probable that he is pausing only to drag his guns across the wild waste of the Somme battlefield, where there is slow progress, to bring new reserves of men into the battle-line, and to prepare another blow, as equal in fury to the first effort as his means now allow after the bloody losses and heavy engagements with the French armies on his left wing.

I doubt whether his next effort will reach anything like the strength of that battering-ram which shocked our lines on March 21. For twelve days since then his wastage of manpower has been incalculable, and every mile of his way is strewn with his dead, here and there a few men, here and there heaps of mortality. Backwards for those twelve days there has flowed a tide of mangled men, filling his hospitals and Red Cross trains. Forty at least of his assault divisions have had to be withdrawn from our front after casualties amounting in some cases, as we know, certainly to 40 and 50 per cent. Many of his companies and battalions have been almost annihilated, only a score or so of men going back to tell a frightful tale to their people. Our heroic rear-guards foiled his first plans and smashed his time-table and broke the spear-heads of his armies, so that they had to turn aside in the direction not belonging to the great strategical plan of the German High Command. Arras is not his. Amiens is not his. The British armies are still intact, in spite of all losses of men and ground, and new French and British armies are at his throat, ready to rend him to death if he is for a moment at their mercy.

The enemy knows all this, but is playing for big stakes,

and their gamblers are ready to throw in all their human counters in order to win or lose the last hazard. So they will not stop now, because, if they stop, they have already lost; and they are waiting only to gather their forces for a final throw. But this delay is our enormous gain. We, too, have time to bring up our fresh men to replace those who fought until they were spent, and who barred the way of the German advance with their bodies and souls. The enemy now in his next battle will meet men who are not tired, and whose resolution is as great as those who met the first onslaught. Australians and New Zealanders have come into line, fresh, keen, uplifted by fierce enthusiasm, stirred by emotions which make these fellows very dangerous to their enemy. I saw them coming to the relief of our hard-pressed troops, and it was a sight which made one's pulse beat, and gave one a sense of new security when the full menace was upon us. These Australians came swinging down towards the old Somme battlefields with the spirit of men to the rescue of great causes. It was their business along the line of the Somme, for did they not take Pozières, and is not that blasted slope hallowed for all of them by memorials of their own dead, and by the graves of many comrades? "We will take Pozières back," they said, "it's our job." To those who fought there under the months of furious fire which broke the earth to fine powder, who went up from Le Sars and into Bapaume on that famous day a year ago, the news that the enemy had come pouring back over that ground was a shock and a challenge.

They waited impatiently for the call to come, in their lines elsewhere. Every hour their impatience grew. "When are we going down? It's a darned shame we are not on our way." At last the call came, and down the roads the Australians came marching with their easy slouching step, with their guns and transport and cookers. It was like men coming back after foreign travels to the old home threatened by invasion. In all the villages behind the

Somme battlefields they were known. At the sight of their slouch hats and their long, clean-shaven "mugs" the villagers came out shouting and cheering. "Les Australiens! Vive les Australiens." Old women came running to them, plucking their loose sleeves, patting their brawny shoulders. Girls waved to them, cheering with shrill voices. And these fellows grinned, and said, "That's all right. Don't you be afraid, kid; we will give 'em Hell."

On transport wagons gipsy-looking fellows sat, looking down on these scenes with their arms round their dogs. Australian gunners, hard as the steel of their 18-pounders, rode their mules through the market towns. They were eager to begin work. Long columns of Australian infantry marched day and night to get to the fighting-lines, and when I looked down these lines of clean-cut hatchet faces the splendour of these men, the grim spirit of them, stirred me with a sense of historic drama. The New Zealanders followed, spick and span, debonair, lads, with the red ribbon round their hats, ruddier than the Australians, like country boys from English orchards. It was a glory on the roads as they passed.

Very soon after they went into the battle-line there were things doing. They sent out patrols and cleared No Man's Land of the Germans. They caught the enemy in ambushes and raked him with bullets, and brought in prisoners and machine-guns. They slaughtered him in several small attacks, and drove him out of the villages and woods and scared him horribly by day and night. Australians who came out since the Somme battles, who have heard endless stories of Pozières and Bapaume with envy, because they were not in that epic of their brothers, scouted round and said, "Well, nobody can say now we haven't seen the Somme, and when are we going up to Pozières?"

New Zealand boys have gone out on perilous adventures and rounded up many Germans. The day after the arrival of these forces I met several of their lads, lightly wounded by machine-gun bullets. "We were a bit rash," said one

of them; "we put our heads into it." But they were sure the enemy would get no further.

English, Irish and Scottish troops, who bore the terrific shook of the German assaults on the first day of these battles, and fought ten days back to our present lines, deserve what rest they now can get, like Ulysses and his men after their long voyage. It is impossible for me to narrate all that I have heard and know about those rear-guard fights, because historic episodes are so crowded that one's pen cannot write them quickly enough. On that great stretch of battlefields, sixty miles long and twenty deep, there were crowds of our men all fighting backwards, with the enemy pressing them close and leaving lines of dead in their wake, and each brigade of ours, each battalion, has its own crowded history.

Among these men were Ulster soldiers, Inniskillings, Royal Irish Rifles, and others of the 36th Division—and their history is typical of all that happened. The enemy broke through on their right flank on March 21 below St.-Quentin, and in a fog, so thick that our machine-gunners could not see fifty yards ahead, streamed through in columns. The Inniskilling Fusiliers held on to their forward redoubts, including one known as the Racecourse Redoubt, until almost surrounded, and then, with other Ulster comrades, fell back beyond the canal, blowing up bridges and fighting desperately to defend the bridgeheads against incessant attacks. The enemy struck in between these Ulster troops and battalions of Manchesters, Bedfords, Yorkshires, and Scottish Fusiliers of the 30th Division on their left, as well as between the Ulstermen and the 14th Division, and it was necessary to draw back towards Ham. At 11.45 on that morning a report was received, saying that Germans had broken through on both sides of the Epine de Dallon, south of St.-Quentin, and Manchester Redoubt. Five minutes later the 108th Brigade of the Ulster Division reported the enemy through Gruchies valley. The gravest news came when it was reported that the Ger-

mans had broken through the 14th Division and were attacking Essigny Station. The 108th Brigade was ordered to form a flank west of Essigny and join up with the 14th on their right at Lezorolles. During night all these brigades of the Ulstermen were withdrawn to the north side of the canal, and blew up the bridges. Early on the morning of the 22nd the 61st Brigade of the 20th Division held the bridgeheads at Tugny and St.-Simon, south of Artemps, but the Germans drove between the 30th and 36th (Ulster) Divisions and compelled a further withdrawal to the Somme defences, where for a time they were still covered by the brigade of the 20th holding the bridgeheads. The enemy was advancing steadily towards Ham on the left flank of the Ulstermen from Jussy to Flavy le Martel, and there was a gap at Esmery Hallon, between the 30th and 36th Divisions. To fill up the gap 200 men from a headquarters staff, clerks, servants, and signallers, assembled, and with great gallantry these men held their ground. Pioneer battalions, among them "Young Citizens" of Belfast, were given rifles, and became a fighting force which beat off heavy attacks.

The enemy was always trying to surround these Ulstermen, and once 200 Germans got behind divisional headquarters and were flung out after sharp fighting by staff officers and men. An officer sent through a message, saying, "I am writing this with one hand, and firing a rifle with the other." After continual rear-guard actions for five days down to the old German trenches across the Roye road, the Ulster troops were supported by French battalions, but were still called upon to fight while the French relief was in progress, although at one time only 300 men could be mustered with strength enough to go into action. During the last days of the withdrawal a staff officer of the division and an officer of the Royal Irish Rifles were captured in a motor-car by a German cavalry patrol. German officers took them prisoners, but left the car. Later another German patrol captured an Ulster ambulance

driver, but on the way met a French patrol advancing in the darkness of night. The ambulance man shouted out "English prisoner," and when the French soldiers fired some shots the German took to flight. The Irish ambulance driver went back, salved the derelict motor-car, which it punctured with bullet holes, and brought it back safely. Afterwards this gallant man spent all that night rescuing wounded. This is but an outline of a narrative, full of strange, thrilling episodes, in which the men of Ulster fought as heroes. So did many other brave men in those days of crisis a week ago.

Nothing is nobler or more tragic in its nobility than the last stand of the 16th Manchesters of the 30th Division in a redoubt called after their own name near St.-Quentin. When the enemy was all round them they held on here, serving their machine-guns. By means of a buried cable they were able to get messages through for some time. The last words came from the commanding officer about 3.20 in the afternoon, when he was slightly wounded. He spoke calmly, even cheerily, but said they could not hold out much longer as practically every man was hit, and the Germans were swarming around.

"The Manchesters will defend this redoubt to the last moment," said this gallant officer. These were his last words, and the redoubt was overwhelmed.

Scottish Fusiliers, Bedfords, Yorkshires, King's Liverpools, and South Lancashire Pioneers fought an astounding number of rear-guard actions from Roupy and Holnon Wood back to Ham, and killed a great number of the enemy, who were like wolves about them. A party of Scottish Fusiliers, who failed to get the order to withdraw, stayed on till the officer felt very lonely, and discovered that the enemy was two miles to the rear of him. He led his men out, and they marched down the road at night with the Germans all round them. Twice they were challenged in the darkness, but no attack was made on them, and they reached our lines near Ham safely after this ex-

traordinary adventure. Odd units of the 20th Division covered the retirement of the worn-out 30th, and held Ham with stragglers and men from the Corps Training School and any fellow from any unit who could stand up with a rifle, until the enemy broke through to Ham in the early morning of March 23. There was a hard rear-guard action at Verlaine by the Scottish Fusiliers, Bedfords, three battalions of King's Liverpools, the South Lancashire Pioneers, and the 23rd entraining Battalion, who fell back under increasing pressure to the Nord Canal, and held a line between Liberamont and Bouverchy. The Germans were hard on their heels that night of the 24th, and were in the village of Esmery Hallon almost before they had left. Again and again, after reaching places where they hoped to rest awhile, these men were called to fight again, and once had to rush out of billets at Arvillers, near Haugest, to throw themselves across the road and bar the enemy's way. While near the village of Bouchoir, near Roye road, they saw a column of German transport crossing this road and turning down in the direction where they were in ambush. The Scottish Fusiliers wanted to let this transport pass them, so that they could bag the lot, but could not be restrained from firing too soon. They emptied German saddles at twenty yards, and captured some wagons, a water-cart, and a field-cooker. The rest of the transport galloped away wildly, and caused confusion in the German lines. So at last these men were relieved, and they staggered with fatigue and lack of sleep, like thousands of other men who had been fighting for a week or more across those same fields of war.

APRIL 3

ONE of the most astonishing things in this war is the way in which the vitality of youth recovers from the overwhelming fatigues of battle, and from its breaking strain upon every quivering nerve of our human body. I have described the weariness of our soldiers after a week or more

of fighting over the Somme battle-grounds, yet nothing I have said can give more than a faint idea of the exhaustion of many of these poor lads of ours, after those bad days when the enemy was all about them and trying to break between them, and they knew that they must hold them or we should lose all that we have and are.

Highlanders of the 51st Division, Black Watch, Gordons, Camerons, Argyll, and Sutherland men, are as tough as any men in our armies, yet some of their officers told me that on the last lap of their rear-guard actions they were tired almost to death, and when called on to make one last effort, after six days and nights of fighting and marching, many of them staggered up like men who had been chloroformed, with dazed eyes and grey and drawn faces, speechless, deaf to words spoken to them, blind to the menace about them, seemingly at the last gasp of strength.

So it was with West Riding troops of the 62nd Division round about Bucquoy, where they had dug a line of defence after beating off attacks at Puisieux early in the battle. They were assaulted five times, all day and night, by the 1st Guards Reserve and 3rd German Guards, who had direct orders to take Bucquoy, and they beat off these waves with frightful losses to the enemy and the loss of many of our own good men. On the 27th the enemy got into Rossignol Wood, from which a year ago I saw them retreat, and the Yorkshiremen were called on to turn them out, which they did. Next day they were attacked all along the line, and repulsed the German Guards everywhere; and for the two following days were fighting patrols incessantly. The Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment fought most gallantly, and in one week these men and their comrades took prisoners from seven German divisions, showing the weight of the numbers against them. A battalion of Yorkshire Light Infantry had hard luck in a moment of crisis, for the enemy swept over a bit of trench —one of the old German trenches derelict for twelve months till then—and when they turned to take these men in the

rear, another wave followed on and caught these Yorkshires in the back. One platoon was isolated and fought most gallantly, refusing to surrender.

"All my men are very cheery, but very tired," was the report of their general at the most critical time. "Being attacked," he says, "was the only thing that kept them awake."

Towards the end of this fighting they had a drunken craving for sleep; and slept standing with their heads falling against the parapet, slept sitting hunched in ditches, slept like dead men when they lay on open ground. But they waked again when the enemy attacked once more and fought him and killed him, and dozed off again. In body and brain these men of ours were tired to the point of death. They were footsore, and their limbs were stiff, and they felt like old, old men. That is the astounding thing. Yesterday I went again among those Highlanders, who fought so long and so hard, and upon my faith it was almost impossible to believe that they were the same men. Their pipers were marching up and down the roads playing "Highland Laddie" and other tunes of Scotland, and the Gordons and the Seaforths and the Argylls stood about in the evening sunshine like men on a village green, taking their ease in times of peace. Their kilts were dirty and stained, but they had washed off the dirt of battle and shaved, and cleaned their steel hats, and the tiredness had gone out of their eyes, and their youth had come back to them.

A colonel of the Seaforths came round the corner, with his bonnet cocked to a jaunty angle. He had been through hell fire, but there was no smoulder of it in his smiling eyes as I saluted him. Early in the German attack on March 21 the enemy worked round behind his battalion headquarters in the fog, having pierced down the gully of the Quéant-Pronville Valley after a frightful bombardment which destroyed our defensive works there. With the colonel was a *padre* and a doctor in his dug-out, and when the machine-

gun bullets came, like the crack of whips outside, he said to them: "You had better get back, the enemy is pretty close." They obeyed his order and went out, but were captured at once by the German troops swarming down. The 6th and 7th Black Watch had been practically cut off.

Away in the front line was a gunner officer in an observation post with a telephone. He spoke over the wire. "There are Boches in the reserve line," he said. Then, after a short silence, "there are Boches in my trench." Then some other words came down the telephone, "they are bombing my o-pip." Those were the last words he spoke.

In another post with a telephone a Scottish officer kept up messages for half an hour, though the enemy had streamed behind him.

At two o'clock that day the enemy having driven southeast by Boursies got into Doignies, retaken for a time, as I have told before, by Tanks and English troops of the 19th Division. But the enemy's progress made things hard for the Highlanders, who were in danger of being outflanked, and orders were given for withdrawal. Next day the enemy followed them up, and attacked in three waves near Hermies, and were flung back with exceedingly heavy losses.

Groups of the 7th Argylls were posted in sunken roads by Demicourt, and their machine-guns swept down platoons and companies of Germans who came within the field of fire. The Guards who attacked them came over not in steel helmets, but in *pickelhaube,* for pride and glory. Others who came against the Scots were the famous "Cockchafers," or Maikaefer, whose regiment was cut up by Welsh battalions on Pilkem Ridge. But it was necessary to withdraw again, as the enemy was advancing on the left by Morchies and Vaux Vraucourt and Beaumetz.

There were a number of heavy guns in Beaumetz, and the Highlanders were determined to save them at all risks. At night steam-tractors went up into the village, with Germans close to them all round, and hitched their caterpillars

to the guns and brought them out under the very noses of the enemy, and saved every one.

The Pioneers of the Highland regiments, with field-commanders of engineers and odd units, made a perimeter defence of Beugny, with a body of 6th Gordons commanded by an officer who has appeared in many of my little pictures of this war since the Battle of Loos and the days at Martinpuich, when he served with other Gordons—the 8-10th—of that gay and gallant crowd. Wounded in the battle of Flanders, he had only come back to France a little while, and now, outside Beugny, was wounded again in the leg. His men carried him out on a stretcher, and on the way back he was wounded again in the leg. The enemy was still advancing like a tide. While English troops of the 41st Division held the lines outside Bapaume, the Jocks passed through these ruins, refreshing themselves in an abandoned canteen where there were fresh eggs and biscuits, and so came to Loupart Wood, which overlooks a great stretch of that desolate world of Somme battlefields, where thousands of little white crosses tell of strife that passed over this mangled earth. Over old places, like Pys and Miraumont, where they had fought two years before, these Highlanders marched now, leaning against each other, some holding hands like children, falling into deeps of sleep whenever they halted for a brief spell, with the enemy trying to encircle them, and with heroic rear-guard actions being fought all round them.

A queer, friendly message came to them almost at the journey's end. It was from the enemy, sent over in a small balloon:

"Good old 51st Division. Sticking it yet. Checry oh!"

That balloon and message now belong to a Scottish sergeant, who would not part with them for any gold.

Some of the most resolute rear-guard fighting in these recent battles was done by some battalions of Manchester and other Lancashire troops of the 42nd Division round

about Bihucourt, Bucquoy, and Ayette—that village was recaptured to-day by a brilliant little attack—when the enemy was pouring down over the Arras-Bapaume road.

After beating off the enemy and restoring the line through Ervillers, Behagnies, and Sapignies, these men were ordered to hold another line further back, and in the most orderly way, as though on field manœuvres, made that movement in three stages in face of the enemy. To cover their withdrawal, they made three counter-attacks with their rear-guards, and Lancashire Fusiliers swept into Behagnies at bayonet-point. It was not the only bayonet charge made by these Lancashire troops. The 6th Manchesters broke the German line near Ablainzeville, and brought out a number of German officers and men as prisoners, with several machine-guns. It was the Manchesters also who attacked Bihucourt with Tanks on the afternoon of March 25 and cleared it of the enemy until fresh hordes bore down. From the first these Lancashire men fought with grim, fierce spirit, to hold back the enemy tide.

A crowd of men of Yorkshire took their band with them into battle "for sake of swank," said one of their officers who is proud of it, and that music playing gay tunes with beat of drums was like wine to weary men, and cheered up all the troops in their neighbourhood.

No historian will ever be able to tell in full the narrative of the last twelve days, with all the adventures of thousands of men moving across barren country with masses of Germans on their flanks, where every man had had hair-breadth escapes, and every battalion an historic episode, and every division an Iliad of its own.

I wonder if the people at home are tired of reading of these things, bored with what I write, wishing I had time and strength to tell much more, to pay some small tribute to all those brave fellows who do not ask for praise, but like to think that their folk at home know what they have done to save their country in its hours of gravest danger,

at all risks of life and limb, and to the very last ounce of their bodily strength. The writing of these things is easier than the doing of them. The reading of them is easier still, so easy that it may make no deep impression on the imagination and heart of the world. To us out here, meeting these men, seeing the look of them after their battles, knowing the ground over which they came, hearing the shell-fire that came out of woods and roads on their way, and having a clear knowledge of their danger and suffering and sacrifice, greater than I can put into words, in a battle more stupendous than the mind can picture, all the crowds of men who have come through seem like supernatural beings, men who have passed through the gates of death, heroes of a mythology which we know to be true.

They are just simple lads, nobodies, as a friend of mine calls them, not endowed with supernatural qualities, not even braver than men in the bulk, not finding any sport in all this, not indifferent to death or pain or the fright of high explosives, yet sticking it, fighting through, never giving up their pride of spirit because they knew that every old thing was up against them, and if they failed all might be lost. So to get a salute from one of these private soldiers is an honour, as though a great captain saluted one, and to talk with any officer who has been through these things fills one with a sense of having been in touch with some famous character of history. For what these men have done, these nobodies, whose names are unknown, who have come from little villas in London, and from Lancashire warehouses, and Yorkshire moors, and the sweet Devonshire lanes, and the wide Scottish moors, and the wet moist wind of southern Ireland, and the streets of Belfast, will be famous for all time in history, and any man who fought down from the Cambrai salient or St.-Quentin will be like those who were with Henry at Agincourt. And the fewer men the greater share of honour; for there were not enough of them against the German tides, yet enough to save us all.

APRIL 4

OUR capture of the village of Ayette yesterday with six officers and nearly 200 men was heartening to our troops as a sign that the tide is turning against the enemy.

Those German storm troops who passed, division through division, and in vast numbers surged after our rear-guards on to the Somme battlefields and across the country of their old retreat beyond Bapaume and Péronne, leaving a wake of dead and wounded behind them all the way, have not come into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor into cities good to sack. They have behind them now, as we had behind us, many miles deep of awful desolation. There is no cover there from wind or rain or high explosives, no billets in which weary soldiers may find dry beds and warmth, no roofs to any houses, no houses to any shell-broken walls. Far beyond the Somme battlefield and the furthest range of our guns in 1916, the enemy himself laid waste to everything that could be blown up or burnt. He made a bonfire of Bapaume and its surrounding hamlets. He wrecked all the beauty of Péronne, with its Renaissance houses and public buildings. With torches and axes and explosive charges he destroyed all the habitations over a long belt of country, so that when our men followed they should have no kind of comfort and be aghast at this desolation. Now they have come back to that waste of their own making, and back across the battlefields of the Somme, where, for many miles more it is more frightful, because every kilometre of this earth is a ghastly reminder to these Germans of the things they suffered there, of their blood that flowed there in that old blood-bath of the Somme, as they called it, and of the agonies and tortures in the ditches which still wind through this mangled earth, though filled now with rank grass, hiding the bones of men and half-buried bodies. Not a pleasant place for German divisions behind their present battle-lines, not more pleasant than a cold, wet hell, where the spectres of slaughtered

men crowd at night round the German sentries and masses of men sleeping under rain-soaked blankets.

It has been raining hard these two nights past and this morning, and I know what those fields of the Somme up by Contaimaison and Courcelette and along the valley of the Ancre look like after rain. I know how sticky is the earth there at Pozières, so that one's feet sink into its slime. I know how deep are those rain-filled shell-holes, and how those undrained trenches become rivers.

For the German gunners, trying to drag up field artillery or long-range guns, there is now bog to come through. It is hard work for the German field-companies, pressed furiously to lay narrow gauge lines over these deserts, according to the orders of the High Command, who insist on the lines being run out almost as quickly as their men advance in the attack, so that the material of war may be brought up. Their rail-heads and dumps are in the mud through which our men struggled in the winter of 1916, and their transport is wallowing in ruts and old wrecked trenches. All that spells delay in their plans and loss of life.

For they are not resting quietly in this waste below the dripping skies. Our guns are harassing all this open country with heavy shells. By day and night our aeroplanes are out with tons of bombs, keeping important cross-roads under deadly fire, so that their transport has had to abandon some main roads and take to wild tracks across crater land; bombing bodies of men lying in the open or in column of march, pouring high explosives down on their ammunition dumps, rail-heads, aerodromes, and assembly places. There is terror for the enemy over these fields in daylight and darkness, for our flying men have gone out in squadrons to scatter death and destruction among them. This work has reached fantastic heights of horror for the German troops under the menace of it. There have been times when I believe we have had as many as 300 aeroplanes up at one time. One squadron alone on one

night dropped six tons of bombs over enemy concentrations, and each man went out six times. Another squadron went out four times in one night, and was bombing for eleven hours. When the enemy was advancing in masses our flying men flew as low as 100 feet, dropping bombs among them, and firing into them with machine-guns. They attacked German patrols of cavalry, and scattered them, and machine-gunned trenches full of men and batteries in action and transport crowding down narrow roads. They fought German scouts and crashed them, and there are several cases in which they fought German aeroplanes at night, so that it was like a fight between vampire bats up there where the clouds were touched by the moonlight. The enemy retaliates as best he can, and suddenly into the quiet villages behind our lines comes the noise of bursting shells like a salvo of heavy guns, as in a village where I was on Tuesday, and the peasants driving their carts or children playing in the roadway are killed or wounded by the thunderbolts out of the grey sky. It is not a pleasant kind of war. The cruelty of it all sickens one, and the nightmare of it darkens one's spirit. The enemy is as ruthless of civilian life as of any other, and in addition to his bombing of innocent places ranges his long guns onto remote little towns where old market women are selling their poultry, and girls are cleaning their shop windows, and war until then has seemed far away.

Yesterday I went again among some of the men who have come back, and all the time as I moved among them and saw them marching the last lap and settling into billets in an old French village and greeting comrades whom they had given up for lost, and prefacing the story of their own adventures with queer gusts of laughter, as men who have seen strange things and had amazing luck, those words kept ringing through my head and heart, "the men who have come back," "the men who have come back," like some old song. . . . Yes, there were some more of them, and one among them whom I desired to see most among these men

who have come back from great peril in ten days of battle. They were men of Sussex and Hampshire and many other counties, and they marched with their transport on that last lap from the battle-lines, through country like their own southern shires of England. Sweat poured down their faces after coming down the long trail with the enemy about them, and they walked stiffly, with drag of feet. But most of them looked wonderfully hard and fit, and they came whistling down winding lanes which led to villages, with Norman gateways and high, gabled houses, and little old churches and market-places of quaint architecture. They dumped their packs in the market-place, tethered their horses next to the church, and searched around for their billets. It was good—a good picture for any artist. Some of the officers had their billet in an *estaminet*, and round its table gathered a group of engineers who have been making counter-attacks as well as trenches, and blowing up Germans as well as bridges, and holding gaps in the line and acting as machine-gunners and riflemen as well as doing their own job of field-companies. They had lost their transport by an accident on a crowded road. They had lost their commanding officer and other good comrades, but now the men who came back would be able to rest awhile after that long trail back from Chalk Quarry, near our old front lines, where I saw them last before the battle. With few francs in their pockets they had bought teacups and a coffee-pot which would do for tea, and they had some margarine in a tin and some ration bread, and now sat down for the first time to a mess table again. But the billeting officer, a young Scotsman, slept like a tired child between his bites of bread and butter, waking up with a start when a brother officer jerked his elbow, and a captain drowsed in the middle of a story of how a transport was destroyed; and a lieutenant of engineers, with a bullet mark down his cheek, did not remember the day of the week on which anything had happened, because the nights had merged into days, and there was no sleep, and no reck-

oning of time in the wild nightmare of rear-guard actions.

It was in a village crowded with French and British troops—clumps of khaki and bouquets of blue, all mingled in market-square—that I met the man I most wanted to meet. He was a gunner officer lost in the turmoil of battle for twelve days past, and now among the men who have come back. There was a greeting of "Hullo, old man!" which is the usual greeting of those who meet after this battle, and then laughing stories of a hot time and field-guns fighting an eight days' rear-guard action, killing Germans at close range with open sights, galloping off to take up new positions, unlimbering again for another action, nearly surrounded a dozen times, but back at last.

I have a coloured rag as souvenir of that battery's action, and I shall keep it in safe custody. It is a French tricolour scarf given to this brigade of artillery by a French officer as a token of esteem for valour. It is a good bit of colour beside me as I write, and a reminder of the gallant men—the men who have come back, not forgetting those good comrades who will never come back.

APRIL 5

HEAVY attacks by the enemy are in progress to-day north of the Somme from Albert to Aveluy Wood against our 12th, 63rd, and 17th Divisions. As far as my knowledge goes up to the hour of writing, when there is not such certain news, their only gain this morning was to bite off a small salient opposite the village of Dernancourt, across the railway from Amiens to Albert. We are now counter-attacking them at this place.

The enemy's attack was in considerable strength—I believe it may be reckoned as something like six German divisions on a battle-front of some 9000 yards, or one regiment to every 600 yards, which is rather formidable odds against our men. It became clear this morning that they have used the past few days of comparative inactivity to get

many of their guns over the bogged ground of the Somme battlefields, for their barrage-fire, which preceded the attack, was heavy and deep, reaching to villages several thousand yards behind our front.

Our troops in this district are defending their positions resolutely, and first reports indicate that the German storm troops are suffering under our machine-gun fire after being shelled in their assembly places by our heavy and field artillery, so that once again the spilling of German blood goes on apace.

Further north there is separate fighting in progress to-day round about the village of Ayette—such a wretched little place of brickdust and broken walls when I saw it last on the way from Arras to Bapaume—and the enemy is trying to recapture this place which we took from him two days ago.

South of the Somme to-day most of the fighting was against French troops, so that I know very little about it, because the army of our Allies is outside my province. English troops fought shoulder to shoulder with the "Forget-me-nots," as the *poilus* call themselves, and the action was very fierce on both sides. The enemy had a prodigious number of men engaged, and from twelve to fourteen German divisions have been identified, including three Guards' divisions. These are the 3rd, commanded by Prince Eitel Friedrich, who commanded the attack on Fort Douaumont in the Battle of Verdun; the Guards' reserve division; the 4th Guards Division; and elements of the famous Brandenburg Corps. The main result of the day's fighting, which was of extreme severity, was the enemy's gain of the village of Hamel, south-east of Corbie, on the Somme, somewhat straightening the line of his advance in the direction of Amiens. It is quite obvious that if his intention is to strike for Amiens itself along the valley of the Somme, challenging another great battle and our forces in liaison with the French, he must at all costs push forward his line across the little River Ancre, north of Albert, in order to avoid an acute salient. I have no doubt that this is the object of his

attack in that neighbourhood to-day, for already his salient south of the Somme is so dangerous to him that our field-guns are shooting his men in the back.

From what I could gather to-day the present action is merely a straightening-out process by the enemy, and is not another great drive, which I believe he will certainly attempt later if his object is attained in these manœuvrings for positions. Meanwhile we keep him pinned across the Ancre and hold our flank firmly on the north bank of the Somme, east of Amiens. Our troops there are fighting with the most dogged resolution to foil his plans.

New Zealanders, Australians, and other troops, in sharp actions with initiative on their side, captured this morning 120 and 130 prisoners in two assaults on the enemy's line, not including several officers. These troops of ours are full of spirit, and the enemy is having a bad time from their activities.

APRIL 8

LAST night and early to-day the enemy's guns were firing heavily along parts of our line, and this morning, when I went south of the Somme, this bombardment continued. It is almost beyond doubt preparatory to another phase of the German offensive, in which they may again attempt to drive a wedge between us and the French. They have still large concentrations of troops north and south of the river, and as the days pass they are bringing more guns into position. At the same time they are demonstrating further north, by very heavy shell-fire around Arras, and further north than that, by Armentières and La Bassee Canal, where they put over many gas shells last night. It is quite possible that they will make another strong attempt to turn our defences round Arras, while at the same time striking hard for Amiens, and hoping by success south of the Somme to make our positions untenable from Albert above the valley of the Ancre. Those are obvious intentions, as clear as sunlight to the enemy, so that we need make no mystery of

them to ourselves, but there is a wide gulf between intention and achievement, and German storm troops have learnt very painful, tragic lessons lately, which have given pause to their High Command. Nevertheless, their menace is serious, and will only be thwarted this time, as before, by the enormous courage of our troops.

There was a heavy wet mist this morning, amounting to a thick white fog in low-lying ground, and it was such a morning as that of March 21, when the German avalanche began to move. With the noise of loud gun-fire in continuous thunder-rolls, it seemed to me certain that another great battle was beginning, but no reports had been received up to midday, and I could get no news of any important German action. But the storm of battle may break out again at any moment, and upon the issue of this next phase depends the enemy hopes and our security.

known with any certainty, but three divisions are in that area, including the 44th Reserve, the 81st and the 10th Ersatz, and it is probable that he has other forces engaged.

Part of our line was held by Portuguese troops, who, for a long time, have been between Laventie and Neuve Chapelle holding positions which were subject to severe raids from time to time. They are now in the thick of this battle, most fiercely beset, and unfortunately giving ground too rapidly.

It is a battle over old and famous ground, where, early in this war, there was most deadly strife during the struggle round Neuve Chapelle in March of 1915, and at Festubert. It is ground where our Indian infantry attacked again and again with most gallant courage, and where, afterwards, the survivors held the lines through the spring and summer, so that the flat fields all round, with fringes of willows along the narrow canals that intersect all this moist land and villages beyond, like Estaires and Laventie and places of ruin like La Gorgue and Richebourg and Quinque Rue, will be for ever haunted with memories of those dark-eyed men who to French peasants seemed fairylike princes and figures out of Arabian Nights' tales. They disappeared long ago, through the mists of these flats, to other fighting fields, in other countries.

Suddenly the enemy has struck, and the centre of strife for a moment has shifted. It is an awkward ground for attack, and bad weather for such ground, because the enemy has to advance across dead-flat marshes, cut through and through by an intricate system of canals, which must be all flooded now, after heavy rain and shell-fire, which has broken the banks. All the enemy's efforts this morning do not seem to have carried him far through those marshes, and up to the time I write his storm troops are being held back and shattered by machine-gun fire before Givenchy, outside an outpost in the marshes sap, and at a place called Picantin, in front of Laventie. If he gets no farther, his venture will be futile except as a demonstration in order

to weaken our reserves by further casualties and increase the strain on our main defence. Meanwhile his own losses must be reaching prodigious figures. To-day again many of his men lie dead in those swamps by Neuve Chapelle.

APRIL 10

IN my message yesterday I told as much as was known of the attack which began in the morning against the British and Portuguese troops between Armentières and Givenchy, on the La Bassée Canal, the strength and purpose of it being then uncertain. It is now clear that this battle, still in progress to-day, is a new and formidable offensive with large objectives, and is not merely a demonstration to withdraw our troops from the area of the Somme. It is also made certain by this new thrust that the German High Command have decided to throw the full weight of their armies against us in an endeavour to destroy our forces in Northern France instead of dividing their efforts by striking also at the French.

I believe their plan is to edge off as much as possible from the French armies, holding them in check by defensive fighting and counter-attacks, in order to concentrate their masses of men and guns opposite the British lines and hurl them in a series of blows, now on our right and now on our left, following each success as far as its possibilities admit. It is a menace which calls for the supreme effort of the armies of the nation and the Allies.

Yesterday, the enemy struck north on our left, beginning, as I have said, in the flat grounds opposite Neuve Chapelle as the centre of the thrust, with Fleurbaix north and Givenchy south, and extending this morning further north still, above Armentières, and including the ridge of Messines. The 34th and 40th Divisions were on the left of the Portuguese, and the 55th on their right.

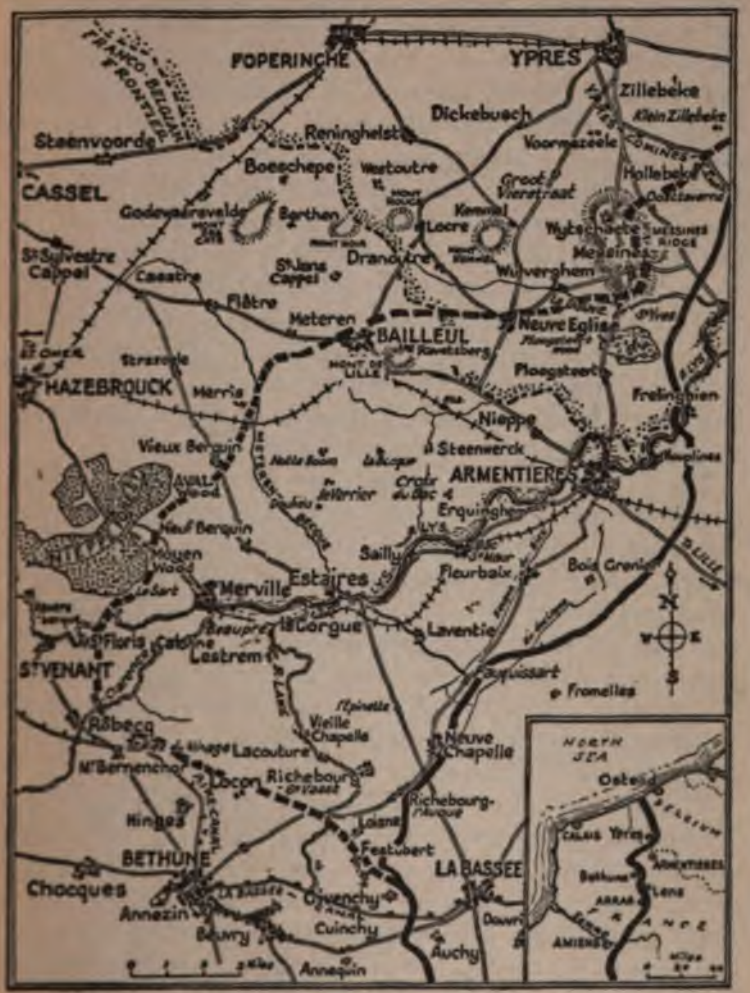
As yesterday, so to-day, they have succeeded in breaking through parts of our first defensive systems, and their threat this morning was most vehement in the neighbour-

hood of Estaires, although our counter-attacks have since driven the enemy back part of the way. Enormous gun-fire was directed against our positions along all this line last night again, after yesterday morning's bombardment, and continued without pause through a very unquiet night, when all through the hours this tumult of great guns beat upon one's ears with continued drum-fire, and all the sky was full of flame and light.

This morning, again, when I went up into French Flanders and through villages which the enemy has been shelling, regardless of women and children there, this frightful unceasing thunder was as loud as ever and told one without further news that the battle was still going on and that the Germans were extending its zone.

I have told in my previous message the first outline of what happened yesterday, but there is more to tell. The great achievement of the day on the part of our troops engaged was the magnificent stand of the 55th Division—all Lancashire troops—who held our right flank firm against fierce, repeated attacks, some four times stronger than themselves in numbers, and who, when the Portuguese troops on their left were broken, formed flank on their left, and so withstood the enemy's hammer blows that at the end of the day and this morning our line was still unbroken there. Givenchy was still ours, and the enemy's waves of men lay shattered in front of them, and 750 prisoners were in our hands.

It was a tragedy for the Portuguese that the heaviest bombardment, in a storm of gun-fire as atrocious in its fury as anything of the kind since March 21, was directed against the centre which they held. It was annihilating to their outposts and smashed their front-line defences, which were stoutly held. It beat backwards and forwards in waves of high explosives from the trench line opposite Neuve Chapelle to the second line opposite Fauquissart and Richebourg St. Vaast. Large numbers of heavy guns also searched behind these defence systems for cross-roads, am-



GERMAN ATTACK IN FLANDERS, APRIL 1918

munition dumps, railways, villages, and headquarters of units, while Portuguese batteries were assailed with gas shells and flying steel. The Portuguese front line was overwhelmed by this intensity of bombardment, and their line had to fall back to the second system. This was attacked by enemy assault troops, and between six and seven in the morning they had reached Fauquissart. The barrage lifted at seven o'clock for a general attack on the second line. Here the strongest body of the Portuguese troops made some kind of a stand, but by eleven o'clock the Germans had forced a way through to Laventie, and the position round Fleurbaix was threatened. They were then holding a line through Richebourg St. Vaast and Laventie, but it was difficult to make a stand here as the Portuguese troops had by that time been put out of action.

The Portuguese field artillery served their guns as long as possible and destroyed the breech blocks whenever it was inevitable to leave a gun behind. Portuguese gunners attached to our heavy batteries behaved with real courage, firing and laying and carrying up ammunition all through the battle under dangerous shelling, and our artillery officers report that nothing could have been better than the way they stuck it. One battalion of their infantry also held on gallantly to Lacouture until two o'clock in the afternoon, when they were charged by the enemy.

This enemy advance in the centre straight through the Portuguese put a severe strain upon the 55th, who were already sustaining terrific attacks on the right by Givenchy. Many of these Lancashire men had been in their billets sleeping peacefully when news of the battle came the night before last, and they had to turn out at once and go straight to the trenches under an abominable fire.

If all of them were like the lad I met this morning in charge of an escort of German prisoners, sitting on top of a ladder, with his steel hat on the back of his head while he told me of his astounding adventures in the dialect of Warrington, for all the world like a music-hall comedian,

in spite of the horrors which he had seen and now described, they must have been remarkable fellows. Oppressed as I was with a sense of tragedy, this boy's monologue, with the snarl of shrapnel as musical accompaniment, made me laugh, as he sat up there with his funny face saying the drollest things. But it wasn't a comedy at all for those Lancashire men. It was grim fighting in a bad little corner of hell. For that was Givenchy yesterday and to-day. The enemy attacked it in crowds, and captured it in the morning, in spite of the deadly rifle and machine-gun fire from these men of the 55th Division. He was hurled out again by parties of bombers and riflemen, but returned to the attack and regained half the village. Then in the night these Lancashire lads, many of them new drafts just arrived in France, counter-attacked once more, and drove the enemy clean out and further back than where he had started. They also took over 700 prisoners, whom I saw to-day, and a very hefty crowd of grey wolves they were, in spite of some boys in glasses, who were under the average size. The rest of them were tall, strapping fellows, and did not look cowed by their capture. Some of them had lost their way in the fog, which otherwise was to their advantage, because in some places they penetrated between Portuguese posts before they were seen. But one lot strayed hopelessly, and came into one of our communication saps.

"Now, boys," said one of our officers, "get your bombs ready and shout."

"We did shout," said the Lancashire lad with the funny face. "Then these Johnnies put up their hands and said 'Kamerad,' just as you read in t' picture papers, and I took ten of 'em, though I'm only nineteen."

In hard fighting the Lancashires and Yorkshires took most of their men, and these Germans are crestfallen, for before the battle a document was read out to them saying that the 55th Division in front of them was not to be feared because it was very weak and very tired, and the German

storm troops would be attacking in the proportion of three regiments to six British companies, and would have no trouble. On the left beyond the flank of the 55th Division the situation was more serious, and parties of the enemy crossed the River Lys and got into the neighbourhood of Croix du Bac and to the outskirts of Estaires. They were apparently not in big numbers there, and this morning were driven back over the Lys. In the centre, where the Portuguese were forced to fall back, the weight of the German attack then fell on the British troops, who fought magnificent defensive actions. Counter-attacks were also made with the greatest gallantry. Near another place, called Huit Maisons, or Eight Houses, some of our men held out in an outpost for many hours and kept the enemy back by their fire.

From captured maps and other information it is proved that the enemy had most ambitious objectives yesterday, which should have brought him to the outskirts of Béthune on the canal bank; but owing to the brave fighting of our men he was not able to achieve this purpose. Two German aviators brought down in our lines say that yesterday's battle was only the beginning of a great attempt north on a twenty-five-mile front, and this is borne out by the extension of the attack to-day above Armentières and up by the Messines Ridge. Of that most northerly attack I know as yet little, because I was in a region further south this morning.

APRIL 11

YESTERDAY afternoon and to-day the enemy has exerted all his strength in men and guns in the battle now raging from the River Lys to Wytschaete, and our troops have been fighting without respite to hold him on our main defensive positions and thrust him back from important ground by repeated counter-attacks.

Once again our men are outnumbered—the same men like the 50th, 51st, 55th, 9th, 19th, and 25th Divisions who

fought until they could hardly stand in the week that followed March 21. It is only by the courage and stubborn will of battalions weakened by losses, and of small parties holding out with grim valour, and of individual soldiers animating their comrades by acts of brave example that the enemy has been unable to make rapid progress, and, at Wytschaete and Messines, has been flung back for a time with the most bloody losses.

Our men of the 34th and 50th Divisions have had to give ground along the Lys Canal south of Armentières, blowing up bridges behind them and the railway bridge at Armentières, and the enemy is now trying to thrust forward south of Merville by bending back our line from Lestrem and getting his guns across the Lys. This he has been able to do in some places by temporary bridges, which we have shelled to pieces as he crossed, and under our fire his engineers are trying to build a stronger bridge south-west of Erquinghem, where, in happier days, we had a Red Cross Hospital. We have had to fall back from Armentières, holding the line from Nieppe to Steenwerck, and the city of Armentières, where once there was gay life even in time of war, with many bright little restaurants and tea shops, until the enemy poured shell-fire over them and filled all the houses and cellars with poison gas, is now a kind of No Man's Land between the lines.

This morning the ceaseless tumult of gun-fire was loud and terrible over all this countryside, and there were strange and thrilling scenes on all the roads leading to the battle zone, where our infantry and gunners were going forward to stem the tide, and masses of transport moved, and civilians passed them in retreat to villages outside the wide area of shell-range, and wounded men came staggering down afoot if they could walk, or were brought down by ambulances threading their way through all this surge and swirl of war if they were badly hit. No man who had any strength to walk would use an ambulance wanted for weaker comrades, and I saw some little groups of English

and Scottish soldiers with bandaged arms and heads standing about for rest on their way back, chatting quietly to villagers, old women and girls, mixed up in a most tragic way with the scenes of war which have suddenly engulfed their homes as the tide beats closer. Here and there stretcher-bearers waited with their burdens on the roadsides, among them men of the Black Watch of the 9th Division with the red heckle in their bonnets, calm and grave like statues, beside their wounded comrades lying there with white upturned faces and never a murmur or groan.

They were the heroes who yesterday, with gallant hearts, came up at a great pace when the enemy was in Wytschaete and Messines, and in a fierce counter-attack the South African Scots of the 9th Division drove him off the crest of the ridge and dealt him a deadly blow. There on that high ground which we won in battle last June, when English and Irish and New Zealand troops stormed the ridge and captured thousands of prisoners, the enemy yesterday fell in great numbers, and his dead lie thick, and though he came on wave after wave after all his day's agony and struggle, he has not gained a yard of the crest, but is beaten back to the reverse side of the slope.

I have already told how, south of Armentières, between Neuve Chapelle and Fleurbaix, the centre of our line was pressed back by hammer blows against the Portuguese, but how the Lancashire men of the 55th Division held firm on the right wing by Givenchy by attacks and counter-attacks in which that patch of ruined earth changed hands several times. Yesterday and to-day the enemy has renewed his attacks there without success, and though those Lancashire lads have been hard pressed, they have never given up their position, and have killed uncountable numbers of German storm troops. They say that they have wiped out wave after wave and company after company, but always more men come, as though with inexhaustible reserves. The enemy, repulsed here, tried yesterday to drive further north,

where he had gained ground from the 50th Division, and to cross the Lys Canal north and south of Estaires. In parts it was shallow enough for his troops to wade, and they tried to do this, but machine-gun fire of Scottish troops caught these men in the ditch and heaped it with their bodies. In the passage of the Lys he was more successful, striking south of Estaires towards Lestrem, and while pressing forward higher up by Armentières.

Yesterday afternoon the situation was anxious for our men up there. Some Northumberland Fusiliers and Royal Scots, after desperate fighting against overwhelming odds, were forced to withdraw from Houplines owing to the enemy's capture of Ploegsteert—poor old Plug Street Wood, famous as our training school of war—and at the same time the enemy's pressure was intense south of Armentières, and he crossed the Lys below Erquinghem.

The Northumberland Fusiliers and their comrades of the 34th Division, grievously few compared with the hostile hordes about them, and almost, though never quite, out of touch with the troops on the right and the left, took up the line from the junction of the Armentières railway with La Bizet, while at the same time some of them were holding round Nieppe, very isolated, because the enemy at that time had penetrated into the village of Steenwerck behind them.

The forces holding Armentières drew back northwards. This left a dangerous gap on the left of the Northumberland Fusiliers and Royal Scots, and there was another gap on their right between them and men of the 20th Middlesex Regiment, who were holding the outer defence of Estaires.

In order to fill these gaps and support our thin line, mixed troops made up of any units that could be gathered together from the 29th, 25th, and 50th Divisions, among them Royal Fusiliers and South Wales Borderers, advanced to reinforce and beat back the enemy opposite Croix du Bac and a place called the White Dog, or Chien Blanc, and Les Haies, below Steenwerck. At seven o'clock last

evening the enemy renewed his attacks all along this line, and after desperate fighting succeeded in forcing our men back a little north-east of Lestrem and a few hundred yards back between Steenwerck and Armentières. But the gaps were filled up by gallant men, among whom were a Trench-Mortar Company, who made a fine counter-attack and beat back the enemy at a critical hour. On the previous day a similar act was done by 350 men of the Cyclist Corps, who reinforced the centre of the Portuguese line and checked the enemy when his drive was a grave menace.

In the afternoon the battle spread northwards into Flanders, the enemy opening a more intense bombardment and attacking in heavy forces almost as far as Gheluvelt (east of Ypres). There was fierce fighting round the White Château at Hollebeke, and the enemy worked from Hollebeke and up from Warneton and "Plug Street" in his rush for Wytschaete and the Messines Ridge, which were his chief objectives. It was then that some of our Scottish and South African troops made a great charge, hurling the enemy out of Wytschaete village, while other English battalions stormed the whole crest of the ridge and cleared it from end to end, though possibly the enemy still remains in the village of Messines on the other side of the slope.

One thing in this new phase of the war is very cruel, and makes one's heart ache, however steeled to war's inevitable brutalities. It is the way in which poor people, non-combatants, have been stricken by the enemy's ruthless methods. It is not to be helped that as the German tide ebbs over new ground the menace and the horror of this advance should travel ahead and cause the evacuation of old people, women, young girls, and children from villages where for nearly four years of war they have lived within sound of the guns, but unhurt. It is, however, brutal of the enemy to fling hundreds of gas shells without warning into a town like Béthune, crowded, as he knows, with civilians, as last June he did into Armentières, and to scatter a harassing

fire of shrapnel and high-velocity shells into little hamlets remote from his fighting-lines. From Béthune there are many women and children in our hospitals suffering from gas poisoning, and to-day and yesterday I have been into villages where shells have fallen before the people there had any chance of escape. Through one village yesterday passed a man carrying a baby with its arm blown off, and many old men and women have been wounded. All these people are very brave, astoundingly gallant. I have only seen a few women weeping to-day, though there was great cause for tears.

APRIL 12

THE enemy is playing the great game, in which he is flinging all he has into the hazard of war. He has, of course, a stupendous number of men, and while holding his lines across the Somme, after his drive down from St.-Quentin, and playing a defensive part against the French on our right, he has moved up to the north, with secrecy and rapidity, large concentrations of troops and guns for new and tremendous blows against us. This is continuing his now determined policy to hurl his strongest weight against the British armies in an attempt to crush us before either France or America is able to draw off his divisions by counter-offensives. So now our troops in the North are faced by enormous forces. Nearly thirty German divisions are against them from Wytschaete to La Bassée Canal, and with those troops, innumerable machine-guns, trench-mortars, and massed batteries of field-guns, very quick to get forward in support of their infantry.

It is right and just towards our people to say quite simply, and without rhodomontade or false heroics, that this northern offensive is as menacing as that which began southwards on March 21, and that our gallant men among those little red-brick villages in French Flanders and in the flat fields between Bailleul and Béthune, are greatly outnumbered, and can only hold back the enemy by fighting with

supreme courage. They have done wonderful things, as I shall tell. Small bodies of them, battalions of divisions heavily engaged over a wide front, with the enemy trying to pierce through at many places with sharp spear-heads of storm troops plentifully armed with machine-guns, have held on to outposts, sometimes isolated, sometimes thinly in touch with other bodies of men, and have stayed there fighting under intense fire, but all the time inflicting bloody losses on the attacking forces and forbidding them to pass.

So was it when the King's Liverpools, King's Own, and other Lancashire troops of the 55th Division defended the village line between Givenchy and Festubert after the Germans had broken through the Portuguese in the centre. Their left flank was exposed, but they not only kept their line intact, but defended each one of its saps and outposts.

It was Liverpool men who held out in the Death or Glory sap, and in another, further north, where they repulsed all attacks, and, seeing a periscope suddenly appear out of the earth in front of them, made a rush round it and killed an Austrian officer observing for Austrian guns.

In reporting this episode they sent the following message:

"Enemy attempted to use binocular periscope opposite our sap. Party went out and killed an Austrian officer and two men, and the periscope has been handed over to the group, to whom it will be very useful."

I saw a number of men to-day belonging to these Liverpool battalions, to the Durham Light Infantry, the Royal Scots, the Royal Scottish Fusiliers, and other units engaged in these battles, and they described the fighting which happened after the Germans captured Neuve Chapelle. Parties of the enemy broke into houses in Laventie and fixed their machine-guns in the rooms, firing through windows down the streets and flinging out bombs upon our men, who tried to rout them out.

One party of the Durhams of the 50th Division was holding an isolated position on the Lys in front of Estaires, and

in the dusk a German officer with some men stood up on the canal bank and shouted to them, "Are you English?"

"We are," cried a young sentry of the Durhams.

"Are you wounded?" asked the German officer in good English.

"Not all of us," said the Durham boy.

"Surrender," shouted the German officer, but this time he was answered with rifle shot.

Forty men came out of houses along the river-side, and a sergeant of the Durhams thought they were Portuguese, and said, "Come on down and join them."

He went too far and was taken prisoner, but our men poured rifle-fire into the Germans, who now came swarming up.

"We killed a good few of them," said one of the Durhams, "but there were always more to come, and our little party had to fall back a bit to escape being captured."

One party of Royal Scots, Scottish Fusiliers, and Gordons of the 51st Division sent up with two machine-guns to strengthen the line in front of Estaires and Laventie dons of the 51st Division sent up with two machine-guns in great numbers, and at the same time were bombed by German aeroplanes, which flew low over their heads with a great roar of engines and rush of air.

The machine-gunners of the Liverpools are wonderful fellows, and on the first day by Givenchy, when their guns were knocked out and buried by shell-fire, they dug them up again and served them again, and both officers and men belonging to the machine-gun companies fought with revolvers and bombs, while guns were kept going by their comrades.

A sergeant of the 3rd Division served a field-gun until the enemy was close on him, and fired 200 rounds between 600 and 200 yards into waves of Germans. The trail of his gun was broken by shell-burst, and the breech-block was so injured that between each round he had to prize it open

with a pickaxe. At last, when the enemy was about to rush him, he destroyed his gun and escaped.

I described yesterday how I saw over 700 prisoners who had been taken by these Lancashire troops. They were trapped with great skill by officers and men familiar with every twist and turn in the ground near Givenchy. When the enemy broke in, the Liverpools worked round them and cut them off, not once but several times. In one trip of this kind they rounded up 300 Germans, and 50 of them surrendered to one of our brigade majors and his orderly, the order being given by a German officer who had been taken first. A certain keep near Festubert was penetrated by the enemy yesterday with two companies, but the King's Liverpools made a counter-attack in the evening, and destroyed them almost to a man. A division flank of their troops was exposed by the German thrust through Neuve Chapelle, a defensive flank was formed by tunnellers and small parties of Portuguese under our officers and some Seaforths, and they have held on since with most resolute courage.

Other men came up to strengthen the line sent up in old London omnibuses and lorries. Meanwhile the Scots of the 51st Division "still sticking it," as the Germans said in their balloon message on the Somme battlefields, were fighting again in their same grim old way along the River Lawe between Locon and Lestrem. They had come up north after their terrific and exhausting adventures from Hermies across the old battlefields. There was no rest for them, and they took up their line and held it against frightful attacks. At dawn yesterday morning the strong post of Vielle Chapelle held by Gordons was fiercely assaulted, and they fought on hour after hour, killing the enemy every time his storm troops made a rush. Scots also defended the main road between Locon and Lestrem, upon which the enemy has poured his fire, but where the Highlanders would not let him pass, and where waves of Germans have fallen under rifle, machine-gun, and field-gun fire.

These are acts of heroism which prove once again the quality of our men, their stubborn courage in defence, their hatred of giving ground. The enemy has put already well over 100 divisions into the battle-line since March 21, and about ninety of these have been against our troops. In this new battle between Wytschaete and La Bassée Canal nearly thirty divisions are engaged, and of those six divisions were in the narrow front north of Lys, driving forward through Nieppe to Steenwerck. There was another group of divisions thrusting through south of Armentières, which was caught in the pincers, and a new German division was suddenly flung in south-west and drove through Estaires towards Merville.

Last night they drove in a wedge between Lestrem and Merville and gained the position of Calonne-sur-la-Lys, east of St.-Venant, to which they are trying to force their way to-day with great intensity of gun-fire and big concentration of machine-gunners and riflemen.

A bloody battle is now being fought out on the ground below the forest of Nieppe. I was all over that ground, the day before yesterday, when the enemy was nearby at Lestrem, and it was from villages there among the woods and between Hazebrouck and St.-Venant that I saw the evacuation of many families while German shrapnel was overhead, and the tumult of the guns was louder and closer. To-day the tide of war has flowed over some of the places through which they trekked only a day ago, and many of their houses have already been shattered by German gun-fire. The scene to-day along the line of this hostile invasion was most tragic, because all the cruelty of war was surrounded by a beauty so intense that the contrast was horrible. The sky was of summer blue, with sunshine glittering on the red-tiled roofs of cottages, and on their white-washed walls, and on their little window-panes. All the hedges were clothed with green and flaked by the snow-white thorn-blossoms. In a night, as it seemed, all the orchards of France have flowered, and cherry- and apple-

trees are in the full splendour of bloom. The fields are powdered with close-growing daisies, and the shadows of the trees are long across the grass as the sun is setting. But over all this, and in the midst of all this is agony and blood; on the roads are fugitives, wounded soldiers, dead horses, guns, and transport. There are fires burning on the hill-sides. I saw their flames and their great rolling clouds of smoke rise this morning from places where, the day before, I had seen French peasants ploughing as though no war were near, and young girls scattering grain over fields harrowed by small brothers, and old women bending to the soil in small farmsteads where all their life was centred, until suddenly a frightful truth touched them, and they had to leave. Sometimes to-day I wished to God the sun would not shine like this, nor nature mock at one with its thrilling beauty of life.

However, our men are full of confidence; if they were forced back they are glad to know that they made the enemy pay heavy prices, and that our line is still unbroken. They are full of faith that against all odds we shall hold our own in the last battle of all. The pageant of the roads is the same, the young gunners on their horses and mules riding by like knights in their steel caps, the infantry marching with a whistling tune on their lips, the transport crawling by with dogs in the wagons, and great bunches of daffodils tied to some of the men's saddles, and old women and children packed among our men in the dim recesses of motor-lorries. Officers and men stand about in villages, under scattered fire, and every man in the Army is doing whatever task falls to him without an outward sign of strain, though in the heart of every man is the thought that these days may decide the fate of the world and all our life now and to come.

APRIL 14

THE Commander-in-Chief's Order of the Day should reveal to our people and to the world what is happening out here

in France—the enemy's objects to seize the Channel Ports, and destroy the British Army, and the frightful forces he has brought against us to achieve that plan, and the call that has come to our troops to hold every position to the last man. "Many amongst us now are tired. . . . With our backs to the wall each one of us must fight to the end."

Yes, our men *are* tired—so tired, after a week's fighting and after these last days and nights, that they can hardly stagger up to resist another attack, yet they do so because their spirit wakes again above their bodily fatigue; so tired that they go on fighting like sleep-walkers, and in any respite lie in ditches and under hedges and in open fields under fire in deep slumber until the shouts of their sergeants stir them again. Some of these men have been fighting since March 21, with only a few days' rest.

You know what the Scottish battalions of the 51st Division have done since that day, fighting all the way back from the St.-Quentin front before holding back the German hordes from the way to Béthune.

The 9th Division have done as much and as long, and after all their desperate fighting down from Gonnelieu and Gauche Wood to Montauban and Mametz this new battle burst upon them, and they flung the enemy off the Messines Ridge and barred his way with their bodies.

English battalions of the 55th, 50th, 34th, and 25th Divisions, through all that first phase in the south, where they fought scores of rear-guard actions with the enemy on both flanks, not sleeping for days and nights, have shared in these northern battles, and have fought, as Sir Douglas Haig has asked them to fight, with their "backs to the wall." Often, in outposts and keeps, at bridge-heads and cross-roads, in bombarded villages and towns, they have fought back from house and street, in Laventie and Merville and Estaires, in Steenwerck and Nieppe and Merris and Bailleul and Béthune. Their losses have not been light in this heroic fighting. England and Scotland must steel their hearts to this sacrifice of their sons. The enemy still

storms against them with fresh men, always fresh men, in overwhelming numbers. Little groups are left out of gallant companies, but these bands of brothers—Royal Fusiliers, Worcesters, Sherwoods, "Koylies," Royal Scots and Scottish Borderers, Liverpools and Yorkshires, and Durham Light Infantry—have no surrender in their souls, and if they yield it is to death.

A dreadful scene of war closes on us, and draws nearer to places not long ago outside its zone—engulfing dear towns and villages in which our soldiers lived behind the lines familiar among the people. Merville, with its Flemish gables and old inns and houses and dainty shops, is now shelled to ruin, and its streets are littered with dead. Into stately Bailleul, with its bell-shaped tower and its great market square and solid old houses, built for merchant princes of the sixteenth century, the enemy is flinging enormous shells, and yesterday, when I went that way to villages around all the storm of battle was centred there, and there was a dreadful sweep of fire bearing down on Merris, close by, and down the road for miles came the people of Bailleul, streaming away from that city in which their homes were being smashed by high explosives.

I have told how yesterday, in the sunlight of a golden day of spring, with all nature singing over the fields, I saw the fires of war burning and high columns of smoke. That night the scene of war became infernal up in Flanders. It was a clear, starlight night, and for miles the horizon was lit by the flame of burning farms and stores and ammunition dumps, and all this pale sky was filled with the wild glare of fires and by the flash of guns. German air-raiders came out dropping bombs. The sound of their engines was a droning song overhead, and our shrapnel winked and flashed about them. Flights of our aeroplanes went out over the positions, and night was noisy with their explosions as they dropped tons of bombs over the German troops. To people living in the villages of Flanders, from which one can see the whole sweep of the battle-line,

that night was full of terror, and from their windows they watched the burning of places from which they had escaped, and bonfires of their homes, and these refugees with sleeping children at their breasts wept. Yesterday the weather changed and there was no sunlight in the sky, but it was leaden grey with a north-east wind howling, and over all the fields dense white fog. I went to places where if there had been any clearness I could have seen every shell burst and the whole range of battle, but now I could see nothing of it. It was a drama of noise beating against one's ears and against one's heart, and a strange terrible thing to stand there, blind as it were, listening to the infernal tumult of gun-fire south of Bailleul, with knockings and sledge-hammer strokes loud and shocking above the incessant drum-fire of field artillery. German shells came howling over into fields and villages beyond Bailleul, bursting with gruff coughs, and there was an evil snarl of shrapnel in the mist.

It was the noise of one of the greatest battles in history, and I listened to it with faith and hope that the enemy would be held back this day by our heroic men out there in those wet fields. Men were coming to their aid. Our guns were coming up, more gunners and more guns for this northern battle. They did not waste any time though they had travelled hard and were dog-weary. They were getting into position—in places where I never expected to see guns at work—dumping down their shells, making their wagon-lines, unlimbering. There was no fluster. Officers and men went about their work quietly with a word or two. They were white with dust, which filled the lines about their eyes, but officers gave their commands cheerily, and the men carried on gamely.

I saw one battery come into action and fire its first shots. They startled some old women tramping by with bundles on their backs getting away from these villages, once so snug under red-tiled roofs, now very sinister, in spite of blossoms in their orchards and on their hedges. Their doors

were open, and there was no one at home. Odd shells had pierced some of their rafters, and groups of our men sat close under their walls, hunched up with their heads drooping, and in ditches by roadsides, or stood with their backs to the wall of some old Flemish church, in that way which always tells one that the place is in shell-range and a likely target for German guns.

Little bodies of troops marched up towards the battle-line, led forward by some young officer with grave eyes. They were streaked with dust and carried heavy packs with their rifles slung. And all about were men of those battalions who have been fighting through all this battle, dirty and tattered, men with the thin gaunt look of soldiers who have been long under fire in the battle-line, but still hard, with tightened lips and steel in their eyes. Some of them slept awhile, stretched out in fields, fathoms deep in sleep. Some of them drowsed as they marched. In one of their headquarters where I went a staff officer slept on his chair in a small farmhouse room, filled with other officers discussing the plans of battle. In another headquarters, on the Scherpenberg, near the battle-line, so near that a shell came through the roof of the hut when they were taking a meal, a staff officer was so tired after four days and nights of battle, that he could not remember one day from another, though when a message came over the wire to say that the enemy was attacking again, he became alert at once, and wakefulness came into his eyes as he went out to give new orders.

I go into these Flemish cottages and barns and our camp huts, from which these battles are being directed, and where there is always a chance of intrusion by high explosives, and find these officers of ours as chatty, smiling, and calm as they have always been in the gravest hours. Yet it is courage and not light-heartedness that keeps them like this, and they stare very frankly at the truth of things and see it nakedly. The truth of things is without camouflage on every road and in every field: the tragedy, cruelty, splen-

dour, and hope of this challenge of fate that has come to our men.

The worst tragedy, apart from the ordeal of our fighting men, is the plight of people who lived in places now caught in the flame of war. Out of Bailleul and Merville and Estaires; out of scores of hamlets and farmsteads which all of us out here knew in happier days they are coming far back in farm-carts and gigs and donkey-carts, on bicycles and afoot, with wheelbarrows and perambulators, on British gun-wagons and in British lorries. They are enormously brave these old, old women and these young girls and children. They sit aloft on the big hay-carts piled high with furniture, while their farm-horses stumble on down long roads, and old women nod or sleep like babies on coloured mattresses, and girls call out "Good luck!" to our soldiers. They drive their cattle before them, and yesterday I saw great herds of cows coming back from the country round Bailleul. Small boys with young mothers tramp sturdily on with one hand clasping their mother's skirt and gripping a bundle of clothes, young heroes of France with the courage of their race. To the last moment some of these people stay in their villages under fire, standing about among our steel-hatted men with no covering to their braided hair, until at last they know they must go or die. So now they are moving away from the battle zone, cared for as far as possible by the French and British authorities.

These men of ours have exceeded all their previous records of valour, though God knows they have filled three years and more with acts of courage. I should want hundreds of columns of this paper to tell in full all they have done during these last days. I can only tell a few things baldly, like a catalogue of dull facts, though in them is the soul of our race and the great supreme sacrifice of the human heart. When the centre was broken at Laventie by a colossal thrust against the Portuguese, the Northumberland Fusiliers of the 50th Division, East Yorks, and

Durham Light Infantry were sent up to hold the line of the Lys and to defend Estaires. It was too late to form a strong defensive line, but these men fought against attack after attack by increasing waves of storm troops.

The Durham Light Infantry of the 50th Division held crossings of the Lys Canal up to Sailly, on a front of 10,500 yards, until the enemy struck into Bac St.-Maur. There was a race for the river, and the Durhams got there first, facing the enemy on the other side, and raking them with rifle-fire. A party of Durhams held the salient over the river at Lestrem for a long time, till it was pounded to mush by German trench-mortars. The bank of the Lys could only be weakly held, and there were terrible fights about the bridgeheads, but the enemy crossed between them. On the morning of April 10 Estaires was filled with shell-fire, and the enemy rushed the swing-bridge and swarmed into the western part of the town, but the Durhams and Northumberland Fusiliers charged down the streets and cleared them of the enemy, making a No Man's Land fifty yards beyond the bridgehead, which they covered with their machine-guns. Their line was turned by the enemy breaking through higher up, close to Armentières, and they had to withdraw.

A message reached a party of East Yorks saying "the enemy is behind us, we are going to fall back." But they refused to retire even then, and fought on until they were surrounded and overpowered.

The Durhams and their comrades dug a line in front of Merville, and withdrew there under heavy fire, firing their own rifles as they went back step by step, with their faces to the enemy. One machine-gunner of ours kept his weapon in action until all his comrades had got away, and the Germans were within seventy yards of him. Then he broke his gun and escaped. These men of ours in this position had against them two and a half German divisions.

Near Lestrem some of the Durhams had trouble in blowing up a bridge owing to the enemy's fire, and men of the

trench-mortar section counter-attacked in order to gain time while two companies of the Durhams stayed on the other side of the river for this purpose. When the bridge was blown up the survivors on the other side swam across, with machine-gun bullets whipping the water about them, and rejoined their comrades.

When the enemy attacked Merville in great strength it was necessary again to blow up bridges, and on one of them ten Germans went up in the explosion after a small party of them had crossed, and died fighting with the engineers in charge of this work. One bridge was left undestroyed, and was seen by a brigade major, a man with cool courage. He searched about for dynamite in a store he happened to know, and put it in position. But he was attacked by German bombers, and had to go more quickly than he is accustomed to move, being a man of unflurried manner.

There was fierce street fighting in Merville during the darkness, and the Durhams and other men fell back fighting. Yesterday the enemy attacked again from Merville, and they were shot down like rabbits by a fierce rifle-fire, which even overmastered their machine-guns. Here yesterday the enemy was slaughtered and all his attacks were repulsed with bloody losses.

In all the fighting round the Lys the 40th Division had a hard tragic time, and the men were called upon for the greatest valour, which they gave to the death. Among those battalions were the Suffolks, Yorks, Welsh Regiment, Royal Scots Fusiliers, Middlesex, and Highland Light Infantry. They held Fleurbaix and Bois Grenier on the left of the Portuguese, and when the Germans broke through our Allies the division found its right flank turned. The 120th Brigade of this division formed a defensive flank and held the bridgeheads to cover the retreat of the 49th Brigade to the south of Bac St.-Maur, fighting rear-guard actions against swarms of the enemy. Parties of the 12th Suffolks, surrounded on three sides, held out at Contees Farm till evening, and then fell back to the north bank of

the Lys. The 13th Yorks on the left held a defensive flank along "Shaftesbury Avenue" to Bois Grenier till eleven o'clock that night. For the next two days there was terrible fighting, and only 1200 men remained out of two brigades. The 34th Division was unable to keep in touch with them, and after holding the Steenwerck switch line the remnants of the 40th Division brigades fell back to Le Mortier. The troops were exhausted, but even then the Highland Light Infantry, Royal Scottish Fusiliers, and Middlesex Regiment counter-attacked and drove back the enemy 630 yards, capturing machine-guns and prisoners. Under increasing pressure they were forced to cross the Lys, blowing up the bridges in the very nick of time to prevent the enemy cutting them off, and so late that several officers had to swim across to escape. The 12th Suffolks and 13th Yorks were still holding stubbornly on the left, and the Division fought until almost the last gasp, when on April 13 the survivors were relieved by the Australians.

Meanwhile during this fighting in the Merville sector there were great battles further north, from Wytschaete Ridge down to Neuve Eglise and Merris, near Bailleul, which are still going on.

I have already described how the 9th Division of Scots swept the enemy back from Messines Ridge. I saw some of their officers yesterday while the fighting was still in progress, and they say that the charge of the South Africans was one of the finest things ever done, because they were still unrested from the Battle of the Somme. But they attacked with tremendous spirit and flung the enemy back. Unfortunately more masses came against them afterwards, and though we still hold Wytschaete village we now swing back from Messines and the southern end of the ridge.

They were Cheshires of the 25th Division who resisted the weight of the German attacks at Neuve Eglise when the enemy brought up several new divisions against these men, who fought against fearful odds, and afterwards Worcesters and Sherwoods and others made a wonderful counter-

attack which drove the enemy out of that place, which was a great menace to all our positions.

Thirteen to fourteen divisions were put in by the enemy between Wytschaete and Bailleul, and for some time it was the supreme courage of English county regiments that kept back these hordes, fighting day after day. Sappers put up great fights in holding gaps in the line through which the enemy came with his machine-guns, trying to widen them for the infantry to follow, as is his method. Several times the South Wales Borderers and their comrades had their flanks exposed by Neuf Berquin and elsewhere, and had to form defensive flanks with small parties, who fought to a finish.

Yesterday the enemy, in intense fighting, made his way into Merris Church, below Bailleul, but was driven back with most severe losses. It was a day of fierce battling on this part of the front and southwards beyond Merville, but along the whole front the enemy was checked.

II

The Flanders Front

April 15

During the past three days the enemy's main effort in Flanders has been to capture Bailleul and its railways, and Old Kemmel Hill, from which one can look over to Wytschaete Ridge. For this purpose the enemy has thrown in all the weight he could gather for these attacks north of Merville, hurrying up fresh divisions all through the fighting to replace shattered and exhausted troops, and concentrating a large amount of heavy and field artillery.

Up to last night our troops in this area between Merris and Wytschaete had engaged some fifteen divisions, only one of which had been previously in action in the Somme battlefields, with battalions of special storm troops, and

part of an Alpine corps who had orders to take Bailleul at all costs. They have not taken Bailleul nor the railway south of it, and our outnumbered men, some of whom had been fighting for many days and nights without sleep, and

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always under fire, have repulsed the enemy again and again, and inflicted frightful losses on him.

The enemy's objective was Kemmel on the first day of this fighting, that is April 10, and his officers are amazed at the resistance made by British soldiers so weak in numbers against their tremendous forces. Their dead lie piled up below the railway embankment near Bailleul, living waves of Germans being mown down by our machine-

gunners, who had great targets for their shooting, and although once yesterday our flank was momentarily threatened south of this city, now filled with the fire of monstrous shells, the line was fully re-established last night by counter-attacks, and thirty Germans were made prisoners, with machine-guns.

In order to surround Bailleul two heavy attacks were made on the west towards Meteren, and on the east at Neuve Eglise. Near Meteren the enemy failed utterly, and suffered immense losses. There has been fierce fighting round a place called the Steam Mill, near Meteren, the enemy having been ordered to capture the Meteren road and the high ground beyond, at whatever sacrifice. They made the sacrifice, but did not get the ground. Last night our troops, who had held Neuve Eglise through three days and nights of intense strife, withdrew, unknown to the enemy, to a line a slight way back from the village in order to avoid staying a target for unceasing shell-fire.

It is now enemy soldiers who this morning are in the ruins, under great bombardment. This battle at Neuve Eglise has been filled with grim episodes, for the village has changed hands several times, and each side has fought most fiercely and with any kind of weapon, small bodies of men attacking and counter-attacking among broken walls and bits of houses, and under the stump of the church tower, at dawn and in darkness, with rifles and bayonets and bombs. The attack on this place was really begun further back, when the enemy struck up through Plug Street on April 10, and drove forward every day since towards this goal of Neuve Eglise.

All the time he was faced and resisted by the troops from Wiltshire, Cheshire, Staffordshire, and Lancashire, while other Lancashire troops, along with the Northumberland and Worcestershire men and others, were holding up the line of the Lys and fighting rear-guard actions round Croix-du-Bac, as I have told before.

A body of Wiltshire, Cheshire, and Staffordshire men of

the 25th Division held the east of Plug Street Wood when the attack burst upon them, and kept their lines intact for two days and nights, though the enemy had pierced behind them, and west of the wood against other troops fighting back under overwhelming pressure towards Neuve Eglise. The situation became serious when the enemy broke into Plug Street village, and made a nest of machine-guns there which could not be routed out by fierce Lancashire counter-attacks. Our units in this fighting belonged mainly to the 17th, 34th, 31st, and 25th Divisions, with the 5th and 33rd Divisions, who came up to their relief.

Some of our own machine-gunners on the west of the wood acted as infantry and charged the enemy outposts, and when the Germans thrust forward again to the hamlet called Romorin and a huddle of houses called Les-Trois-Pipes, pioneers of South Wales Borderers not trained for fighting attacked them most gallantly. But the enemy poured up to this place, and there was severe fighting there for hours.

Meanwhile, on the night of the 11th, men of the 25th Division holding Plug Street Wood were ordered to abandon this dangerous position, in which they were nearly surrounded, and fall back to a line in front of Neuve Eglise and La Nieppe. They did this in face of the enemy, and the last men in the wood were two subalterns who were entirely surrounded by Germans. They gathered some bombs and made their way down an old trench in the darkness—there was a glare of fire through Plug Street Wood, where in the old days I used to visit friends on summer days when snipers' bullets came whisking off the leaves—and by the light of this they made their way at last through the enemy lines and so escaped. Some other officers were not so lucky. On the way back to the line outside Neuve Eglise a colonel with a machine-gun section led his men against a body of the enemy in possession of a ruin called La Grande Munque, and killed a number of them, before

getting back wounded with the little party of his surviving men.

Later the enemy broke in the neighbourhood of an old *estaminet* called Kort Pyp (the "Short Pipe"), and round here a body of King's Royal Rifles of the 25th Division fought almost to the last man in a desperate action. Another party of the same regiment suffered heavily in an heroic action to check the enemy south of Neuve Eglise, towards which they were pressing now in great strength. On the night before last our line fell back from near La Creche and swung round in a loop south of Neuve Eglise towards Ravelsberg Farm. It was then that Neuve Eglise itself became a place of hellish battle.

The enemy broke through into its ruined streets, and small parties of the Wiltshires, Worcesters, "Koylies," and others sprang on them or were killed, and fought desperately in backyards and over broken walls and in shell-pierced houses wherever they could find Germans or hear the tattoo of machine-guns. Several times the enemy was cleared out of most of the town, and our men held the hollow square containing most of the streets and defended it as a kind of fortress, though with dwindling numbers under a heavy fire of shells and trench-mortars and machine-guns. The enemy was savage in his attacks against these men, and from behind the German commanding officers sent up fresh troops with stern orders to have done with the business and destroy our men, whom they vastly outnumbered. But they could not take Neuve Eglise by direct assault, and last night our troops, Wiltshires and Cheshires, of the 25th, made a counter-attack at Crucifix Corner, won ground, and brought back five machine-guns, and left there many German dead. It was an astounding feat of grim courage.

But Neuve Eglise was given up by us for the reasons I have stated. The enemy, unable to get it by infantry assault, shelled it fiercely by the fire of many guns and made it a death-trap, as now it is for them. Without yielding

to a direct assault, our men obeyed orders and stumbled out of the cursed place, silently and unknown to their enemy, and took up a line further back.

Southwards the situation is much the same as when I last wrote. The enemy has not made any progress of importance beyond Merville and along the Lys Canal above St. Venant, where our men have been holding the line against repeated attacks. On Sunday they attacked four times, but each time were swept by our machine-gun fire. For a while they got into the hamlet called Cornet-Malo, and fixed machine-guns in its cottages, but Argylls and Royal Scots of the 61st Division drove them out by rifle-fire and bombing. They came on again last night and made another breach in the village, but were again routed out, while another struggle went on about some brickfields nearby against our Warwicks of the 61st Division.

For the moment, therefore, the enemy is checked in his ambitious plans, and the heroism of our soldiers has foiled his main efforts, broken, for the time being at least, his drive towards the coast, and shattered many of his proud divisions, many times more in number than our forces in this northern battle zone. Fortunately many of our most tired men have been relieved. Fresher troops of the 19th, 49th, 59th, and 33rd are facing the enemy, and the front line is now strongly supported. So one may breathe with relief after the anxiety of three days ago, when things were at their worst.

From prisoners and other sources the proud plans, enormous hopes, and detailed preparations for this mighty assault on us with the vast strength of the German army are becoming known to us. Before the Battle of Armentières the greatest secrecy was kept. No letters were allowed to be sent and no leave given to any German officer or man. No information of any kind was given to officers until they reached the line a few hours before the battle began, after forced marches from the detraining point.

The order then came: "The Sixth German army on

April 9 is breaking through the English position and will advance on Hazebrouck."

It was stated that the second battalion of the 156th Infantry Regiment would follow the 32nd Division, and march on Fleurbaix. Later an order came, saying the division was held up at Fleurbaix, and the 156th Infantry Regiment would swing to the left and go to Bac-St.-Maur.

It was when they were crossing the Lys that their casualties were heaviest, and the infantry were cut up by our artillery fire. The enemy brought up large numbers of field-guns, many of which were not allowed to register before the battle. Many shells fell short and killed German infantrymen. They were especially strong in trench-mortars, brought up in baskets, and it is said that only one mortar in each group was allowed to register before action. Their greatest trouble was in getting transport forward over the sticky mud in the old No Man's Land, and no doubt thousands of men are now working furiously to make roads and lay tramlines.

The German officers seem to have been inspired with fanatical faith in victory, with which they tried to animate their men. Major-General Hofer, commanding a brigade of the Ersatz Reserve, who is a one-armed man, led over the first wave, brandishing his stick before the astonished soldiers, who had never seen one of their high officers going over the top. On the night before the attack their losses were heavy under the concentrated fire of our guns on their assembly places, and the first waves had to climb over wreckage and dead bodies on their way of advance. Their first exaltation must have flickered out, I think, for since the beginning of the attack the German losses have been ghastly, and their gains have not been as great as their hopes.

APRIL 16

IT seemed inevitable, after our loss of Neuve Eglise, that the enemy should make a quick and strong effort to capture

Bailleul, and this he did last night by putting into the battle three divisions of fresh assaulting troops not previously used in this fighting, and encircling that city by fierce attacks on the ground south-east and east, including the ridge of Le Ravelsberg and Mont de Lille.

His troops, as I mentioned in my message yesterday describing the first attacks on Bailleul, including his Alpine corps of Jaegers and possibly a Bavarian division, and the 117th Division. Among our men defending the city against these heavy forces were Staffords and Notts and Derbies. Yesterday when I was in the country round Bailleul the enemy's guns were working up for this new attack, and there was a continual bombardment spreading up to Wytschaete Ridge. Heavy shells were being flung into Bailleul itself, and the smoke of fires was rising like mist from the small towns and villages like Meteren and Morbecque down to Merville.

Our guns were also pounding the enemy's positions, and through that bombardment concentrations of German infantry, guns, transport and cavalry were moving up the roads in and north of Merville. Intense shell-fire was ranged upon them, while our air squadrons went out in the evening and at night and dropped large quantities of high explosives upon this traffic of men and beasts, so that they must have suffered many casualties.

In their attacks round Ravelsberg Spur, where all through the old Flanders fighting we had camps and hutments known by heart among our English and New Zealand troops, and divisional headquarters during active operations, the enemy must have lost heavily again. For our men were stubborn in defence, and their machine-gun fire must have been of a deadly nature owing to their positions along railway and on ridge. But the enemy advanced upon them in waves striking up on both sides of Bailleul, so that after strong resistance our line was withdrawn beyond the town. For tactical reasons, apart from the importance of the railway line, it is better for our troops to

be out of Bailleul, for it threatened to become like Ypres in the old bad days, when all our traffic and transport had to pass between buildings falling beneath atrocious shell-fire, through squares which were targets for German guns, and out by cross-roads which were death-traps. Nevertheless it is with deep regret that one thinks of poor old Bailleul in German hands after all these years of association with our armies. There is not a man with any long service out here who has not passed through Bailleul scores of times on the way to Armentières or Kemmel, looking up at its old bell-shape tower in the great square surrounded by sixteenth-century houses with Flemish roofs and high dormer windows and Renaissance fronts. It was a grim old town, with high walls between narrow streets and grey brick-work, which looked cold in this northern weather, but there were friendly people there, who knew and welcomed our men, and many houses were sanctuaries in which fighting men could forget war and enjoy for a little while the warmth and kindliness of life, with some musician among them sitting at the piano in a cosy room among a French family with whom they were billeted. Thousands of our officers who went forward to the lines about Plug Street, or Wytschaete, used to take dinner at the Hotel du Faucon; an old place, not very comfortable or grand within, but where there was good food and good wine and good comradeship. There was an officers' club round the corner of the Grande Place, served by comely Flemish lasses; and here in winter one saw groups of muddy fellows straight out of the bogs of Flemish battlefields, but merry and bright after a wash and brush up, and over the tables one heard them telling strange tales of war with a gust of laughter or remembrance of some moment of great peril in their eyes, or a passing salute of the spirit to some "pal" who had just "gone west"—strange, thrilling, tragic-comic tales of the way men lived in those old days of trench warfare which some of us thought would last until the end. And in old Bailleul there were little tea-shops, where we

could pass a pleasant hour on the way elsewhere, sitting in the courtyards in summer, where flowering plants grew up walls, and pleasant women waited among customers who became their friends. I remember on one day in one such place a group of officers gathered round a little girl, who was an invalid and could not walk, and whose delight it was to play tunes on the gramophone to these tall soldiers with mud on them, who were very gentle and chivalrous to this child with her big blue eyes and waxen face. Always in the Grande Place of Bailleul there were crowds of men. For three years and more I saw them there in all weathers, with snow on their steel hats or the glare of the sun, and on the days of battle up in Flanders there was a turbulent pageant passing through the square, a pageant of guns and wagons and mules and men, with pipes for Scottish troops and brass bands for English troops. The King came here one day, and all the square was lined by fighting men of the Naval Division, and New Zealanders, and Australians, and Scots, and on the steps of the town hall were groups of Army nurses. Just outside the city, by the asylum for poor old women, who had wit enough for terror when shells fell near and the sky of night was aflame with the lights of war, we had an aerodrome belonging to the Royal Naval Air Service, where, in hangers and pavilions were as jolly a set of boys as heart of man could hope to meet about the world. I went among them many times and listened to their queer jargon of "air speech," which is a different language to us "earth men," and wondered at the amazing courage of these children, who were the great knights-errant of the sky and great captains. The enemy used to hate their home here and came over in the darkness and at dawn to drop bombs on their sheds, and they told me how this sort of thing was devilish awkward when they were shaving or in their tubs. They always paid him back for such behaviour with terrible vengeance. Crowds of memories come back to me about Bailleul, and it is sad now that this dear old city is no more than a mem-

ory to us, who knew its streets so well and its friendly people, whom a day or two ago I saw trekking away down the long roads of exile while their homes were burning behind them.

The capture of this city belongs to the third great attack which has been delivered against us by the enemy since March 21. Always he has massed his strength opposite our lines and struck with full weight against our troops. In the first phase, down from St.-Quentin and Cambrai salient, the French came to our help and relieved us by their good and gallant aid. But the Germans then edged away from the French to strike us again, this time at Arras, where they failed. Then the third time has now followed in this northern blow; and once again our men have had to sustain the abominable pressure of German divisions, constantly relieved and supported by fresh divisions passing through them, while our troops fight on and on, killing the enemy in large numbers, but having to withdraw to new lines of defence under these enormous odds. Their heroism and their sacrifice are beyond words that may be uttered, except in the silence of one's heart.

This morning the enemy developed his gain of Bailleul by pressing westward of the city, and at the same time delivered separate and fierce attacks against Wytschaete village, which he appears to have captured after desperate fighting, as well as Spanbroekmolen. It is probable that the next German battle will be directed against the hills of Kemmel, Mont Noir, and Mont Rouge, which run east and west above Bailleul.

III

The Panorama of Battle

April 16

The battle from Wytschaete to Meteren and the line west of Merville still goes on furiously, and the enemy is spend-

ing his strength of divisions recently thrown into this fighting by repeated attacks, which during the past twenty-four hours have resulted in very great German losses. Yesterday morning the fortune of war seemed again in favour of the enemy by his capture of Wytschaete ridge down to Spanbroekmolen, and by his entry of Meteren, west of Bailleul. Our hard-pressed troops were forced to give ground at both those places after a resistance which cost the enemy many lives, but in the evening counter-attacks hurled the enemy back from Wytschaete village—that pile of brickdust above stumps of dead trees which were Wytschaete Wood, and in a separate battle west of Bailleul regained at least for a time part of Meteren.

This morning renewed counter-attacks gave us back all Meteren, and the enemy garrison there was destroyed. (Sir Douglas Haig last night reported that the enemy had reoccupied Meteren and Wytschaete.) I watched the battle last night and again this morning from the centre of an arc of fire which is like a loop flung round Wytschaete to Bailleul, and in a sharp curve round to Merris and the country about Merville, so that great gun-fire and the whole sweep of battle were close about one on three sides.

It was an astounding panorama of open warfare such as I never dreamed of seeing on this Western Front, where for so long both sides were hemmed in by trenches. Every slope and village and windmill and town and road in this new line of battle has been familiar to me for more than three years, and now I could tell by a glance what places were being destroyed by the enemy's guns, and saw his barrage-fire was flung round certain hillsides, and what roads—those dusty, winding roads down which I have motored hundreds of times—were smoking from his trail of high explosives. Bailleul was still blazing. In the early evening, after a wet, misty day which filled all this battlefield with whitish fog, one could only see that city under a cloud, but as the sky darkened and the wind blew some of the mist away enormous flames burned redly in the poor

dead heart of Bailleul, and in their glare there were dark masses of walls and broken roofs outlined jaggedly by fire. To the left the village of Locre was aflame under a storm of high explosives, and the enemy's guns were putting heavy shells down the roads which lead out of that place. There were fires of burning farms and hamlets as far southwards as Merville, behind one, as one stood looking out to Bailleul, and lesser fires of single cottages and haystacks, and the wind drifted all the smoke of them across the sky in long white ribbons.

It was just before dusk that counter-attacks began northwards from Wytschaete southwards for Meteren, and although before then there had been steady slogging of guns and howling of shells, at that time this volume of dreadful noise increased tremendously, and drumfire broke out in fury, so that the sky and earth trembled with it. It was like the beating of all the drums of the world in a muffled tattoo, above which and through which there were enormous clangouring hammer-strokes from British and German heavies. It was a wet, wild evening, with few pale gleams of sun through storm clouds and smoke of guns, and for miles all this panorama of battle was boiling and seething with bursting shells and curling wreaths of smoke from batteries in action. I was in the midst of wide concentric rings of field-guns and heavy-guns firing rapidly. When darkness came each battery was revealed by its flashes, and all fields around me were filled with red winkings and sharp stabs of flame. Almost till darkness came birds of ours were on the wing—birds with brave hearts in them, flying over these frightful fields. Our airmen were flying low and searching through the mists for movements of enemy troops in order to call to the guns to shell and scatter them. Lights went up from Meteren about 7.30, and it was then that our men sent up these rockets to tell their whereabouts. Through the dusk and darkness there were many men moving. Groups of mud-coloured men who had been sleeping under hedges sprang up to

shouts of sergeants, formed up in platoons, and marched towards the fires. One party, as they went, broke into song "Good-byee, good-byee," and jogged down the winding lane close to the wheels of the gun-limbers where one could see the drivers' faces by the glow of cigarette-ends. It was not a healthy spot. Shells had come over hedges white with thorn-blossom, and into little orchards beyond, where cherry-blossom is thick as the fall of snow on their branches, and there were dead horses about and other things. But these boys shouted out their song, and nearby other men sat under the banks of ditches smoking and chatting. Above the tumult of gun-fire a bugle rang out, played by a lad who stepped out into the lane. They were the good old notes of "Come to the cookhouse," and a fine subtle odour of soup from the field-kitchens told the meaning of his music.

During the night the enemy brought up more guns and lengthened his range, and flung over 8-inch stuff and other abominable things with a wide-scattered fire over all these fields and villages, so that one could be blown to bits in fields of springing crops or in the back garden of any cottage here or on three sides of any old millhouse. It was just a question of luck, but among soldiers who have to pass through the places because it is their unpleasant job there were old women and girls and farm boys and babies. They had stayed there too long with that queer fatalistic belief that if the enemy is shelling the next village but one they are safe. But the enemy had brought forward his guns and had lengthened his range, and now this morning these poor people were in the zone of fire in the actual battle-fields. Even then some of them dallied to pack their bundles, anxious, but not panic-stricken, and old ladies in black dresses tramped down lanes and roads under the scattered fire of shells that came roaring like devils and burst with damnable explosions, as though it were nothing but a thunderstorm from which they were hurrying for shelter.

One old woman told me in queer Flemish patois that she

wanted to go home, and pointed to her farmstead, which was being knocked to pieces by 5.9's. A lanky boy, leaning up against a mill-house watching the battle, explained her case to me in good English.

"Old woman is daft," he said. "She wants to get her cow in that old house down there. A man was killed there five minutes ago, so a Tommy told me."

He turned to the old wrinkled dame, and said in Flemish, which was so like English I could make out his words, "You come again this afternoon, mother." It seemed to me that the afternoon would be no better than the morning round about that red-roofed cottage which had lost half its walls. It is a strange phase of the war.

An officer of the Scottish Rifles whom I met up there this morning said that at Meteren, from which he had just come back after hard fighting, he lived in a deserted farmhouse, where people had left their chickens and cows, saying they could do what they liked with them. So the Scottish Rifles had baked chicken for supper, and milked the cows for breakfast, and escaped the Germans' shell-fire in that rural spot, and shot down Germans at easy rifle range.

I heard to-day of how some of the Worcesters of the 33rd Division were put out to prevent the enemy from moving north and working between Bailleul and Strazeele, after the Germans' attack, and how the general of the division gathered together every kind of men he could find to fill the breach. They were a miscellaneous lot of fellows, including cyclists, dismounted Tank crews, and orderlies, and this little crowd made a glorious stand and kept the enemy back by rifle and Lewis-gun fire.

In this gallant 33rd Division and in its 100th Brigade there were Worcesters, Glasgow Highlanders, and King's Royal Rifles, the "Church Lads' Brigade," as they are called, amongst those who made the stubborn and terrific defence of Neuve Eglise. They fought incessantly for four days against attack after attack, until they were sur-

rounded on both flanks. The colonel of the Worcesters stayed in the village till the last. Dead Germans now lie piled around its walls as proof of this long defence. Another body of troops in this neighbourhood who fought to the death were some Highland Light Infantry, whom I first met in the days of the old Somme battles, when they showed great gallantry in many fights. Now some of them have fought their last fight, and died rather than surrender to the enemy all round them.

Between Neuve Eglise and Meteren other troops fought during this last week with unyielding spirit against dreadful odds, and only gave ground when they were exposed on their flanks and presented such a thin line of khaki that the enemy had only to fall against them with his weight of fresh divisions and he was bound to break through. So with dwindling numbers the Queens fought for three days, turned on one flank and then on the other, but still maintaining their rear-guard actions and making the enemy pay a high price in life and blood for every bit of ground.

Cyclists of the 33rd Division acted as cavalry, going out on patrols to find the enemy's whereabouts, and firing at his outposts. Round by Meteren the Scottish Rifles went out on stalking expeditions, between heavy attacks which they beat off, and lay in ambush for German machine-gunners, who came creeping up under hedges, and destroyed them by rifle-fire. When brigade headquarters was attacked and taken by Germans, some Royal Engineers, with infantry, made a counter-attack and gained back this place, destroyed many of the enemy, and brought back forty of them.

I saw some of the prisoners this morning marching across the battlefield and looking about them insolently with an air of pride as though they belonged to the winning side. Yet others are now saying quite frankly that the German High Command has failed in its big plans.

Béthune was on their time-table for April 10, and it is

not theirs now. Bailleul was to have been taken in the first attack. Arras was counted as theirs on March 28.

There were Middlesex men among the defenders of Meteren, and this morning they made a fine counter-attack, which helped to shatter the German garrison there. During all this fighting our machine-gunners have had many human targets, and have fired so steadily into the waves of Germans that outside Meteren they wore out forty barrels. All this countryside is littered with German dead. One German regiment further south had five battalion commanders killed in three days, and everywhere their losses in officers have been high.

It is with natural regret that one hears of our withdrawal from the heights east of Ypres in order to straighten the line and economize men. This is military wisdom and beyond any kind of criticism, as it seems to me, but the grief lies in the loss of ground captured by so much heroic fighting round the old Ypres salient and at such a sacrifice of brave lives. There is one other regret to-day, though only sentimental. Albert Church tower—the Tower of the Golden Virgin, who bent head downwards over that ruined city with her babe outstretched—has fallen under gun-fire. It was a great landmark bound up with all our memories, but, alas! the old prophecy that the war would end when the Madonna fell has not been fulfilled, though it was our gunners who did their best to hurry up that time of peace.

APRIL 17

THERE are several actions in progress to-day, practically all the way from the Flanders Front down from Wytschaete to the country in front of the forest of Nieppe and as far south as Givenchy. The enemy is making desperate efforts with strong forces to capture Kemmel Hill, which his troops have been ordered to take at whatever sacrifice, and with this object he is trying to break away beyond Meteren, west of Bailleul, as well as striking down from the ridges north of it.

These attacks against our northern front were preceded yesterday by a strong offensive against the Belgians between Kippe and Langemarck on a front of six kilometres (four miles), but after gaining entry into the front-line trenches the Germans were counter-attacked in the most gallant way by the Belgians, who made 600 prisoners, from regiments representing at least four German divisions, among whom were many officers. During our withdrawal from the height of Passchendaele, the enemy troops hesitated very much in following up, and it was many hours before their forward patrols drew anywhere near. Meanwhile our guns were waiting for them, and swept this ground with fire, killing their outposts and breaking up their assemblies in Polygon Wood and other places on the old Flanders battlefields of last year's fighting. All that ground is still as horrible as when I described it in the early autumn of last year, with its innumerable shell-craters, filled to the brim with water and liquid bogs, among its dead trees and wreckage of battle. So it is not good for advancing troops, and the enemy is wretched there. Prisoners taken here and further south are disconsolate, and show no enthusiasm for a continuance of this offensive. They have been told by their officers that they are going to break through to Calais and the Channel Ports, but they do not believe they will ever get there, and admit that their losses have been ghastly.

Meanwhile an army of a different colour is being revealed to them alongside ours, and they know that on this road to Calais they must not only break through British divisions, against whom they have been fighting themselves out, but also through French troops, who are now coming to our aid after our men have been sustaining such terrible onslaughts for nearly two weeks from masses of German divisions, passing through each other in endless sequence in order to destroy our armies before we could get relief. The arrival of French troops on our northern front is the most important act that has happened during the past three or

four days, and it was with deep satisfaction that we met these troops on the roads, and knew that at last our poor, tired men would get support and help against their overwhelming odds. Beside our khaki army has grown very quickly an army in blue, the cornflower blue of the French *poilus*. They are splendid men, hard and solid fellows who have been war-worn and weather-worn during these three and a half years past, and look great fighting men who have gone many times into battle, and know all that war can teach them in endurance and cunning and quick attack. As they came marching up the roads to the Front they were like a streaming river of blue—blue helmets and blue coats, and blue carts, and blue lorries, all blending into one tone through these April mists as they went winding over the countryside and through the French market towns, where their own people waved to them, and then through villages on the edge of the Flanders battlefields, where they waited to go into action under the shell-broken wall or under the hedges, above which our shell-fire travelled, or in the fields where they made their bivouacs, and fragrant steams arose to one's nostrils as the *cuistots* lifted the lid of stew-pans, and hungry men gathered around after the long march. I saw some of these French soldiers under fire yesterday, harassing fire which the enemy was flinging about the roads and fields, and they were very careless of its menace, and went about their jobs calmly, with many jokes among themselves, like men who are accustomed to this sort of thing and make no account of it. Some of their officers were strolling about on a plot of ground which the enemy was ploughing with odd shells, big and beastly things which came with a shrill sing-song and burst enormously, and these French officers, very chic, very courteous to the English about them, smoked cigarettes and chatted together as they watched the battle not far away and the flames of Bailleul and the wicked line of fire from German barrages down Flemish roads, and their nerves seemed unshaken by the noise and they were unexcited. Yesterday morning

to these German soldiers who are sent into that carnage. Yet it goes on, and will go on until even they revolt from increasing slaughter.

Up in the north, between Wytschaete and Bailleul, where the French are fighting with us, there were no further attacks on a big scale after the preparatory efforts to capture Kemmel Hill. The enemy is probably pausing, before striking another blow with full weight by troops specially trained to hill-fighting, like the Jaegers and 11th Bavarians and Alpine corps from the mountain districts in Germany. The Alpine troops have so far not indulged their spirits with plunder on a big scale, which is their intention, as revealed in one of their letters.

"We have made up our minds," wrote one of them, "to plunder ruthlessly, and that is the beauty of the whole thing. In the Alpine Corps we understand the business."

Meanwhile in the north the Belgians are justly elated over their brilliant success, in which they attacked and captured 700 of the enemy. According to the account of Belgian officers, their gallant troops went into action singing and waving their helmets to salute their flying men, who flew low overhead, and every man was uplifted by enthusiasm. The enemy was hard hit by them. He will get more such knocks from the armies of Britain, France, and Belgium now barring his path.

MONDAY

No big infantry attacks have been launched by the enemy during the past few days since his costly failures round Givenchy, but in my opinion this pause is simply due to his intention to prepare fully, by massing of heavy guns and new divisions, for another phase of his offensive on a scale as equal as possible to that of March 21. Owing to his immense losses during the last four weeks—I see they are calculated roughly as reaching about 400,000 men—his most stupendous efforts will hardly enable him to bring into line anything like that first assembly of divisions, but

he has still very large numbers of men available, and I have no doubt he is now engaged in putting them into position for immediate action. Where he will attempt to strike next will soon be known; he is threatening all along the line from Ypres to the Somme.

Last night at ten o'clock he began a violent bombardment of our lines north of Aveluy Wood on the Ancre, and this was followed by fierce fighting in the darkness which lasted until four o'clock this morning. It was a night which favoured such an enterprise, for the sky was clear and it was possible for men to see their way some distance ahead, though not visible themselves until quite close. Our men were ready for them, and there was severe fighting on both sides. Apart from that action, there was only harassing fire and outpost encounters from one end of the line to the other.

APRIL 20

ALMOST for the first day since that March 21—now just a calendar month ago since the enemy began his massed attacks in immense strength, with intent to destroy our armies and divide us from the French—there has been no German action against us, and our front has quietened down into desultory shelling.

We may claim honestly and thankfully that this is due to our battalions in line from Wytschaete and Kemmel to the Ancre and the Somme, who, by their most determined resistance under long and fierce bombardment and against fresh storm troops far outnumbering themselves, beat off the enemy's last efforts to break their front and hurled him back with ghastly losses.

Otherwise there would have been no pause. For had the enemy smashed past the Givenchy Keep the day before yesterday and crossed the La Bassée Canal north of Béthune, his crowded divisions and field artillery would have sought to surge through on the roads to the Aire in another drive. Or had he succeeded in turning Kemmel

Hill and storming the heights of Mont Rouge and Mont Noir there would have been no waiting policy, but the German High Command would have flung in all their reserves in the attempt to force a gap and gain a way through to the coast.

Our men lying out there in the ditches of Flanders, with French troops mingled with them so that one sees a glint of blue under one hedge and mud-coloured khaki under another, repulsed all the attacks on Thursday and Friday by their sweeping fire from ground that had been mangled by the bombardment about them, and smashed not only those waves of German storm troops, but also the plans of the German High Command. What the Germans have reaped in the preliminary attacks beyond Bailleul, and still more in their desperate attempts to break through between Robecq and Givenchy, is a new harvest of bleeding men garnered in field-hospitals behind their lines, and filled with an unceasing wreckage of human life.

Another blow to them was their bloody repulse by the Belgians on April 17. They had prepared an attack in force. Besides three regiments of the 1st Landwehr Division, usually holding this sector between the Ypres-Staden Railway and Kippe, they brought up from Dixmude —poor Dixmude—into whose flaming ruins I went when it was first bombarded in October of 1914—two regiments of the 6th Bavarian Division, and from the coast the 5th Matrosen Regiment of the 2nd Naval Division, with a regiment of the 58th Saxons.

It was a heavy force, and they hoped to surprise and annihilate the Belgian resistance by their weight and quickness of attack. The Belgians were waiting for them, standing to in those swampy fields which they have held against the enemy for three and a half years, always shelled, always paying a daily toll of life and limb; not getting much glory or recognition, because of the great battles elsewhere, but patient and enduring as when I knew them

on the Yser in the first dreadful winter of the war, and their little Regular Army fought to a finish.

Even before the battle last Wednesday the German Marines, Saxon troops, and Landwehr suffered misery and lost many men. They lay out in the flat wet fields two nights previously, and were very cold and scared by the Belgian gun-fire which burst among them. They had no great artillery behind them, and the Saxons and the German sailors now prisoners of the Belgians curse bitterly, because they were expected to get through easily in spite of this. The enemy's intention was to take Bixschoote and advance across the Yser Canal, driving south to Poperinghe. What they did by their massed attacks was to penetrate at a point near Hockske, south-east of Merckem, the main weight of their pressure being directed along the Bixschoote road.

The Belgians delivered a quick counter-attack with wonderful enthusiasm among officers and men. They had a perfect knowledge of the country, and used this fully by striking up from a place called Luyghem in such a way that the enemy was driven towards the swamp, where any who went in sank up to the neck in ice-cold water. The Germans were cut off from their own lines and trapped. Seven hundred of them surrendered, men of all the regiments I have mentioned, and they seemed to think themselves lucky at getting off so cheaply, though they quailed when they were brought back through the towns behind the lines, and the Belgian women, remembering many things, raised a cry as these men passed. It was not a pleasant sound. I heard it once in France, when a German officer passed through with an escort. It was a cry which made my blood run cold. But there is gladness among the Belgian troops, for they had long waited for their chance of striking, and made good.

So the German High Command cannot be well pleased with the last four days of their record. Their time-table has at least been disarranged, and the figures of the cas-

ualties with which one day they must face their people grow apace. What the German soldiers are saying about it all we only know from prisoners, some of whom believe in victory and are arrogant in that belief, but many of whom are disillusioned and despairing.

One curious document has fallen into our hands, revealing a disaffected spirit in the German ranks. It is a letter from a man of the 3rd Guards Division, written to his brother in the 15th Reserve Division:

"I strongly advise you to hide yourself and remain behind when your company goes into line. You needn't be afraid of punishment. If you should be punished, it would only be lightly, and that is better than being killed. When I rejoined my company I heard that my best friend had been killed, and that so affected me that I vowed I would never go into the line again. You will find that you are not the only one to remain behind. In fact, you will find more than half the company there.

"At Passchendaele I was fool enough to go into the line, and on our way our company got a full hit from an enemy shell. Twenty-three were killed and twenty-eight wounded in our platoon. The rest of the company was blown to atoms. With much trouble we collected eight men of the first platoon, twelve men of the second, and one man of the third platoon.

"And what were the results of my devotion to duty? Three days of charcoal fumes, no sleep, wet to the skin, boots full of slime and mud, my heart in my boots, my eyes closed—waiting for death. Wise ones had remained and made themselves comfortable."

A grim picture of an unrecorded episode of war like thousands of others month by month. But the spirit of this letter shows that, in spite of courage, some German soldiers at least are asking themselves why they should be so sacrificed in this shambles for the blood lust of their

leaders. After last week's battles many thousands of them must repent of their belief in a cheap and easy victory over the British armies. But that will make no difference to men like Ludendorff. The check they got last week will make no difference to their policy of bringing up all the possible weight of men and guns and hurling it against the British and French troops. They will make—perhaps before these words are printed, certainly before many days have passed—another and greater attempt to capture Kemmel, and their recent inactivity on the Somme does not mean at all that they have given up the idea of seizing the high ground beyond Albert and advancing past Villers-Bretonneux towards Amiens. They are only biding their time before striking again with more men and more guns.

After being on the Flanders front and seeing the panorama of that battle between Kemmel and Bailleul, with its flaming villages and farms, where lately our dear men, who had been fighting incessantly for many days, were supported and relieved in certain sectors by French troops, I went to-day southwards to see how things are about the Somme, where the enemy stays below Villers-Bretonneux on the south side of the river, and in Vaire Wood, beyond Corbie on the north side, with Amiens still so far from them that its high cathedral and shining roofs, dim through the mists which rise from the river, must seem like a mirage mocking at their hopes.

They are shelling Amiens each day with high velocities from long-range guns, and as I passed through to-day the savage howl of these things came overhead. At night they bomb it from waves of aeroplanes, as a week or two ago when I was there. On a clear moonlight night these raiders came over and dropped their explosives, killing and wounding women and children and slaughtering poor beasts, so that the white light of the moon shone down upon dead horses lying in pools of blood.

Most of the enemy's shelling is on the railway, but his

bombs are scattered about this great old city, which for me and many others in this war is crowded with memories, some happy and some pitiful; of charming people there who became our friends; of little dinners with officers who came for a brief spell between their battles; of shopping expeditions, when there was always laughter and sparkling eyes behind the counter; of walks along the Somme on summer days, with the birds singing above the rumble of the gun-fire away there where the river was red with blood, and of moonlit walks about the close of the cathedral, so beauteous in its white miracle of stone, so high and grand above all the strife of men, and yet so touched with tenderness, as it seemed to me, for all the aching hearts that came to stand awhile below its tall, straight columns—women and children, muddy soldiers, French and English, Australians and Scots, peasant-girls and great ladies—with the light streaming through the painted windows upon them, and a listening silence in their souls.

I was very glad to see to-day that the cathedral has not been hit by shell-fire. Some high explosives of bomb or shell have burst near it, but have only scarred its walls and buttresses and broken some of its windows. That is sad enough, for they were windows of old glass, dating from the fifteenth century, and it was priceless. But we are still saved the tragedy of losing the beauty of that great shrine which holds so much of the soul of France, and is one of the treasures of the world. . . . Poor Amiens! It was in sadness that I passed through her streets to-day, with that sense of sinister menace which always comes to one in a city under fire, like Arras or Armentières. Beyond I travelled to ground from which one looks on to the German positions and the line of country across the Somme which will be our next battlefields when the enemy makes another thrust this way.

Immediately in front of where I stood, across the river, was Villers-Bretonneux, with the ruins made during recent weeks, and now all jagged and fretted on the sky-

line, like the crumbling battlements of a mediæval castle. For several days the enemy has been pouring gas shells into it, and I saw this work being done this morning, and each shell burst with a yellowish cloud in which there is deadly poison, fatal if one is without his gas-mask. Some shells came howling on my side of the river, but, apart from these and odd bursts of machine-gun fire, the battle-line was strangely quiet—quiet, but grim and sinister.

SUNDAY

In the morning the sky was dark and heavy along the front with storm clouds, and in places the snow fell thick enough to whiten the fields for an hour or two. This April snow was strange, for it rested on hedges already white with blossoming thorn, and on fruit-trees in orchards that are laden with the promise of this year's harvest.

A north-east wind came moaning over the battle-lines, and through the clouds there were passing gleams of sunlight which touched the ruins of that charred village of Villers-Bretonneux, in which clouds of foul vapours roamed, and along the barren ridge which rises from the southern bank of the Somme to Vaire Wood, where the enemy has his outposts. At the moment the guns were mostly silent. Only here and there and now and then there were flashes from the valley of the Somme, and five sharp hammer-strokes from a battery in action, between sudden splutterings of machine-gun fire. Meanwhile, in the villages behind the lines near the point of liaison and along the roads which lead to those sectors of the front, our troops are mingled with the French, who are also reinforcing us in the region of Bailleul. They come marching along with full packs—and the French "Poilu's" pack is very full, rising high above his blue helmet, for he stuffs a mass of things inside for the comfort of the outer and inner man, with extra pairs of boots and tin pots for warming his food, and some dog's-eared books for quiet moments under shell-fire, and tobacco tins and

bits of chocolate mixed up with his vests and love-letters and old socks. But he carries all this like a snail carries its shell—as part of himself, and does not seem overburdened. With their rifles stacked on the side-walks they stroll up and down the streets of villages which bear the wound marks of war, with gaps and wreckage between their houses, and brick-work scarred with shrapnel, and carry on friendly conversations with Australian soldiers, Tommies, Jocks, and our traffic men, who are the masters of ceremony along the roads of war, and friendly souls to old women, small children, wandering Chinamen, stray dogs, and the girls at the level crossings between one transport column and another. These French and English conversations are interesting and peculiar. With few words like "good," "no," "bon," "fini," "sale boche," eked out by shrugs, winks, bursts of laughter, and the language of signs the soldiers of both nations understand each other perfectly, and establish the friendliest relations. This mingling of blue and khaki has changed the colour scheme in some of our scenes of war, and gives one a sense of closer union with the spirit and valour of France. French ambulances and British ambulances, their wounded and ours, pass each other down some of the roads, and on the same battlefields men of France and England are together.

A day or two ago I saw some of our walking wounded in Flanders, making their way slowly to field dressing-stations. They had their arms about each other for mutual support, and limped painfully through the village, which the enemy was harassing with scattered shells. Two French officers standing by watched these wounded pass, and one of them said, "Those English boys know how to suffer bravely." Presently a French soldier, hit in the leg, stumbled by on the arm of one of our men, and the officer said, "C'est l'Entente cordiale de la souffrance" (It is the cordial understanding of pain).

Our men are stoical in suffering. In the casualty clearing-stations to which they came back in large numbers dur-

ing the worst days of these battles, there was hardly any moan among them, even in the wards where the badly wounded lay. In one place I went to during the hardest fighting on the Somme, there was a great congestion of wounded, owing to the way in which some of our field-hospitals had to pack up their tents and evacuate their patients with the enemy bearing down on them. It was an old place like a mediæval castle, with thick, high walls around, and in long rooms, built perhaps for barracks, our wounded lay in rows on the floors, stretcher by stretcher, in long vistas of blanketed bodies, upstairs and downstairs. It was a castle of pain, and no poet of the Middle Ages writing an allegory of human suffering caused by the evil spell of man's own wickedness could have conjured up a more tragic vision than was here on these bare boards, where English, Scottish, and Irish lads lay waiting for the surgeons after great battles against an overwhelming enemy, more cruel than any devouring dragon or monster of mythology. But they did not groan very much. Hardly at all, except when a man turned and moaned in his sleep. One only heard the hard breathing of many suffering men, and now and then long, quivering sighs. Many of them were smoking as they lay still with wide-open eyes, and their courage was as fine here as on the field of battle.

V

Nearest to Amiens

April 24

After a very heavy bombardment the enemy attacked Villers-Bretonneux this morning with two divisions, and as I write the battle is in progress. So far his troops have not advanced far, but seem to be in the outskirts of the village.

Villers-Bretonneux is that village on the ridge south-east

of Amiens, which I have described several times lately, after seeing it fiercely shelled by high explosives and gas. It is a place of some size, where we used to have a corps headquarters and administrative offices, but for the last two weeks or more it has gradually been smashed and ruined under the enemy's fire, and is now seen as a line of fretted walls and broken buildings on high ground above the Somme, with clouds of yellowish gas floating about it. It is an important position in reference to Amiens, perched up there on the hill above the Somme, and its capture was the definite objective of the enemy this morning, including ground beyond it, making a total depth of advance of four or five kilometres, should they succeed. They also intended to take the village of Cachy, on the road from Villers-Bretonneux to Boves, which is on the River Avre, due east of Amiens.

I was in Boves yesterday afternoon when all was fairly quiet, except for harassing fire and counter-battery work in the neighbourhood until about four o'clock when a heavy bombardment began on both sides all along this line. It does not seem to have lasted long and was destructive shooting against gun positions. For some days our field-batteries have been severely engaged, and the enemy's artillery has searched for them continually in order to knock out the guns and gunners, as I heard yesterday from one of our gunnery officers as he sat on his kit outside a small tent, in a little orchard laden with blossom, on the edge of this zone of fire, and asked me for general news of the war, and then with a "So long," said, "I must be going up to the battery." He went up, not knowing that before night passed he would be in the midst of another battle, after long and tragic adventures on the way down from the railway embankment by St.-Quentin, beginning on that day, March 21, from which we date all recent history. His gunners had never rested since then.

To-day the German bombardment broke loose in all its fury at about three o'clock in the morning, and lasted until

something like 6.45, when these two divisions of infantry advanced upon Villers-Bretonneux and Cachy from Hangard Wood and Marcelcave and the ground below Warfusee. They were the 4th Guards Division, who have already been heavily engaged twice in these recent battles, and are now for the third time, with the 77th Division recently from Russia, and not before in action on this front. They are mostly Rhinelanders and Westphalians, with groups of Alsatians. The Guards, after their heavy losses, have received fresh drafts from Berlin, and are fairly up to strength again. At the same time as this attack was launched this morning a third German division, the 13th, made up also of Westphalian troops, attacked the French near Castel, to the southwards of us, gaining footing for a time, it seems on the rising ground, round which French troops pivoted from the right and threw them back. On our front the enemy used Tanks for the first time in this offensive, though there have been many reports that he was about to do so. But these were seen beyond all doubt, three of them advancing with German infantry down the road to Cachy and Domart. It is possible that, also for the first time in this war, there will be Tanks engaged against Tanks, like a naval engagement between cruisers.

The enemy was able for a time to get a footing in the outskirts of Villers-Bretonneux, where there has been close and hard fighting, but my latest news is that all our positions round Hangard Wood are intact, and that the enemy has suffered many losses from our artillery and machine-gun fire.

To-morrow I may have more to tell. Except for a German raid near Albert and a minor engagement near Robecq, in which our men took sixty prisoners, no infantry action has taken place on the rest of the front, but all along the line the enemy has been shooting heavily from Ypres downwards, wherever his guns can reach. It is, perhaps, the tuning-up of his artillery for another phase of his offensive. To-day's battle at Villers-Bretonneux has, as I

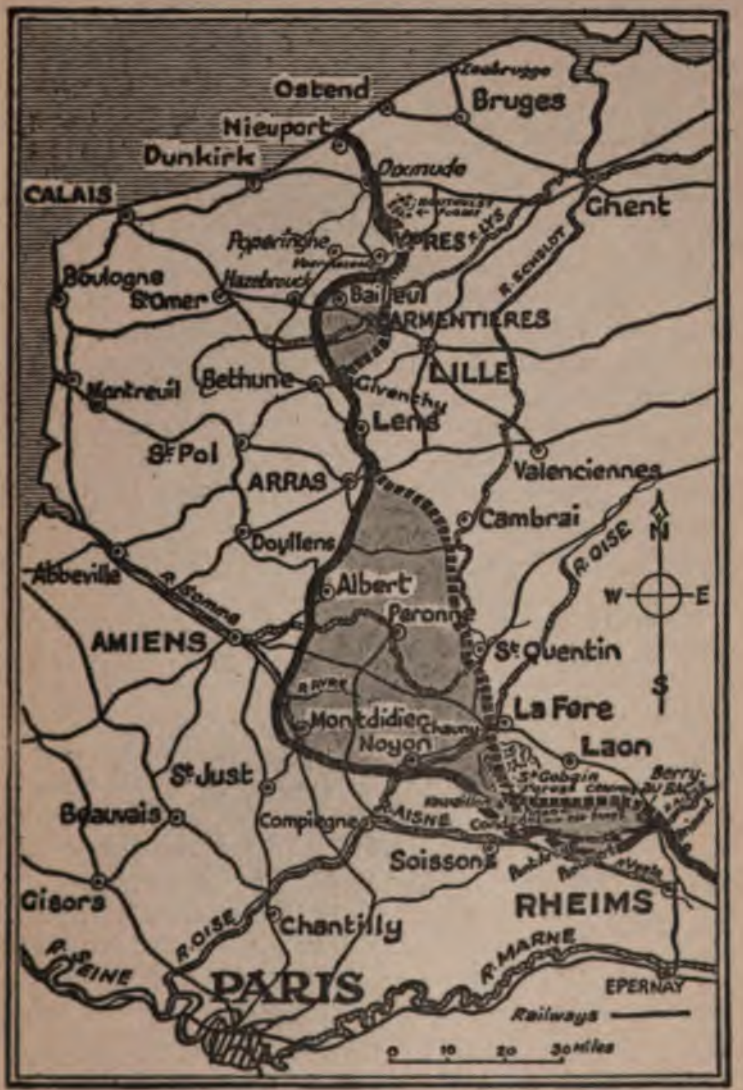
have told, only limited and short objectives, and is planned altogether differently from previous actions since March 21, which have been unlimited in their objectives, with troops under orders to push as far forward as possible wherever they could find a gap or a weakening. It is perhaps reaction caused by slaughter of massed attacks which failed definitely at Arras and from Givenchy northwards.

APRIL 25

IN my account yesterday of the fighting round Villers-Bretonneux I was only able to give the narrative up to the point when the enemy had reached the outskirts of the village, after his attack with large numbers of infantry and some Tanks upon the English battalions of the 8th Division, who included Berkshires, Northamptons, Middlesex, and East Lancashires.

After that many things have happened, for we lost Villers-Bretonneux completely. The enemy was in possession of it and of the neighbouring ground long enough to stuff it with men and machine-guns, and up to ten o'clock last night believed that he held it firmly and permanently. But after that hour it seems that a change in the situation was made by a brilliant counter-attack of Australian troops, who, by the most skilful and daring piece of generalship, were sent forward in the darkness, without preliminary artillery preparation, and, relying absolutely on the weapons they carried, to regain this important position, which gave the enemy full observation of our positions on both sides of the Somme valley beyond Amiens.

The splendid courage of the Australian troops, the cunning of their machine-gunners, and the fine leadership of their officers, achieved success, and in conjunction with English battalions they spent the night clearing out the enemy from the village, where he made a desperate resistance, and brought back altogether something like 700 or 800 prisoners. It was a complete reversal of fortune for the enemy, and, in this twenty-four hours of fighting



LINES OF GERMAN ADVANCE AFTER FLANDERS OFFENSIVE

he has lost large numbers of men, whose bodies lie in heaps between Villers-Bretonneux and Warfusee, and all about the ruins and fields in that neighbourhood. Owing to the late hour of this counter-attack I knew nothing of what had happened in the night until I went down early this morning to that sector of our front, and saw scenes which at once revealed this turn of fortune's wheel.

The village of Villers-Bretonneux itself, which I saw above the valley of the Somme, down which I passed, was no longer under fire, either from our guns or from the enemy's, and from its quietude it seemed as if a truce had been declared there, though, as I learnt quickly, there was no truce, but only a cessation of gun-fire, because the Australian, English, and German soldiers were still mixed up so closely that shelling was impossible on both sides. Even now German machine-gunners entirely cut off from their lines by the counter-attack, resisting in bits of ruin and below banks near the village on the western side, were maintaining fire on our men, who were engaged in routing them out.

Several of our roads showed every sign of murderous fire which German gunners had flung about yesterday, and many dead horses lay about the tracks. But passing them were living men, though many of them had the ash-grey look of dead bodies, and they were Germans in the field grey of their army, and now our prisoners. There were many of them trudging slowly away from the battlefields under escort of English and Australian soldiers in small parties, here and there with only two or three of our men guarding them, and one long column numbering several hundred.

All through the morning I saw these groups limping slowly back. Some of them carried stretchers high on their shoulders with bodies of their own wounded officers and men, and now and again they halted on the roadside and laid their stretchers down, and I saw gaunt faces staring up beneath grey overcoats—gaunt, grey faces of men gravely wounded. At the head of some of these parties

walked German officers in steel helmets, holding themselves stiffly, but punctilious in saluting us, and non-commissioned officers marshalled their own men with rasping commands, as though still on their own side of the lines. They were tall, sturdy bodies of men, but with a worn famished look not surprising to see after their night of terror, and many hours without food, as they were cut off from supplies by our artillery fire before the battle. The biggest crowd I saw came marching in front of the Australian headquarters this morning, and the staff officers, who had been working all night in the direction of the battle, came out to see these "birds," and were glad to see so many of them as visible proof of success. There would have been thirty more but for two German shells, which caught this column as they were leaving Villers-Bretonneux, killing that number on the road. Many of the others whom I now saw, and who lay down on the grass in every attitude of exhaustion, were bespattered with blood, which mixed in clots on the white dust of their clothes. The field in which they lay was all silver and gold with daisies and buttercups, and these heaps of field-grey men, in their grim helmets, which give them a strange malignant look, spread themselves out on this lawn, and some of them slept until their sergeants shouted to them again, and they lined up for their rations.

They were men who had been fighting all night in Villers-Bretonneux—fighting with two fingers pressed to the triggers of machine-guns, fighting with rifles over bits of wall and through the slits in walls of ruined houses, until English and Australian troops got round them and shouted "Hands up!" They were men of German divisions, who yesterday morning at six o'clock went with their Tanks to seize the village which had been swept by fire for hours, and filled with gas shells, so that they did not expect such trouble. What happened then relates exclusively to English battalions, for in the beginning of the attack the Australian front was hardly touched, except for minor

affairs at Sailly-le-Sec, in which enemy parties were repulsed with losses.

But in Villers-Bretonneux and around it were our East Lancashire, Middlesex, Berkshire, and Northampton troops, with West Yorkshires and others. They had to endure a terrible ordeal of many hours of monstrous fire, so intense that an officer of the Middlesex, who was in the Foreign Legion before he entered this war and has been through many battles, says this gun-fire is the worst he has seen. He is a hardened man, schooled to the endurance of fire if any man may be, but amongst his men were some young soldiers who have come up as drafts. The enemy was favoured by mist, for which he had been waiting, and under cover of this he sent his Tanks into action for the first time. There were four or five of them of heavier armament than ours, with 2-inch guns and four machine-guns. Two or three of them moved to the eastern side of Villers-Bretonneux, working up our trenches there, and another, or more than one, team came along the valley below the village and turned up to the western side.

Four divisions, not two, as I said yesterday before we had full identifications, took part in this attack. They were the 4th Guards, the 77th—quite new to this phase of the war—228th, and 243rd. This morning our intelligence officers obtained identifications of twelve regiments in each division and of each company in each battalion. They were in full strength of divisions, and a great weight of men on such a narrow front against one of ours that had already been under frightful fire, and had been living in clouds of poison gas with their masks on. The officer of the Middlesex to whom I have referred was in a bit of a trench when the first German Tank attacked his men on the east side of the village, and it went right over him as he lay crouching, and travelled on accompanied by bodies of troops. The Middlesex and West Yorks put up a great fight, but had to give ground to superior numbers. East Lancashires, who were the garrison of Villers-Bretonneux,

were also attacked with great odds, and after a brave resistance fell back with the general line, which took up position, towards the end of this first phase of the battle west of Villers-Bretonneux and in the edge of Bois l'Abbé, to the left of it.

Into this wood in the course of the day a German patrol of one officer and forty men made their way, and stayed there out of touch with their own men, and were taken prisoners last night. Last night the enemy seemed secure in Villers-Bretonneux, and, as I have said, crammed it with machine-guns and men.

The Australians then decided to make a night attack. "It looked a pretty mad thing to do," said one of their generals, but in war it is the pretty mad thing which sometimes brings the best victory, for audacity wins when it is carried out with judgment and skill. This morning his prisoners were outside his headquarters as proof of his achievement, and his men were still mopping up Villers-Bretonneux.

It was difficult to attack suddenly like this. There was no artillery preparation. There should have been a moon, but by bad luck it was veiled in a thick, wet mist. It was decided by the Australian general that his men should go straight into the attack with the bayonet and machine-gun, not waiting for artillery protection, which would tell the enemy what was coming. The plan of attack was to push forward in two bodies, and to encircle Villers-Bretonneux, while some Northamptons, D.C.L.I., and others were in the centre with orders to fight through the village from the north. This manœuvre was carried out owing to the magnificent courage of each Australian soldier and the gallantry of their officers.

The Germans fought desperately when they found themselves in danger of being trapped. They had nests of machine-guns along the railway embankment below the village, and these fired fiercely, sweeping the attackers, who tried to advance upon them. Those who worked round

north and east of the village, also, came under a burst of machine-gun fire from weapons hidden among the ruins and in trenches, but they rounded up the enemy and fought him, from one bit of ruin to another, in streets which used to be filled with civilian life only a few weeks ago, and crowded with staff officers and staff cars, but now were littered with dead bodies and raked by bullets. The Australians captured two light field-guns which the enemy had brought up in the morning according to his present habit of advancing guns behind his third wave of men, and several *minenwerfer* and many machine-guns. During the night they and our English troops seized over 500 men as prisoners, and sent them back, and several hundreds seem to have been routed out to-day. Judging from those I saw myself, the living were not so many as the dead.

It was fierce fighting in Villers-Bretonneux and around it last night and this morning. The enemy fought until put out by bayonet or rifle-bullet or machine-gun, and the Australian officers say that they have never seen such piles of dead, not even outside Bullecourt or Lagnicourt last year, as those who lie about this village of frightful strife.

This morning the enemy were seen massing in Hangard Wood, and our field-batteries wiped them out, and other parties came "dribbling over"—it is the Australian way of putting it—from Warfusee, and Australian guns swept them away. Our horse artillery also had terrible targets.

German Tanks, though heavier than ours, with bigger guns, have now beaten a retreat, leaving one of their type in No Man's Land. It has a high turret and thick armour plates, and is steered and worked on a different system from ours. One of them was killed by a Tank of our old class, and then we put in some of our newer, faster and smaller types, which can steer almost as easily as motor-cars, as I know, because I have travelled in one at a fast pace over rough ground.

These set out to attack bodies of German infantry of the 77th Division, forming up near Cachy. It was a terrible

encounter, and when they returned this morning their flanks were red with blood. They slew Germans, not by dozens nor by scores, but by platoons and companies. They got right among the masses of men, and swept them with fire, and those they did not kill with their guns they crushed beneath them, manœuvring about and trampling them down as they fell. It seems to have been as bloody a slaughter as anything in this war. So Villers-Bretonneux is a black name for Germans to-day. There are still German soldiers in the town, holding out with their nests of machine-guns, but they seem to be cut off, and we are working steadily through it, so that by to-night it is expected to be cleared of the last remaining enemy. If this is so it will be a hard and bad blow to the German High Command, who wanted this ground for further and bigger actions.

Having been down on the Somme, I can only give the barest details of what has been happening up north in Flanders around Kemmel Hill, where French and British troops have been heavily engaged.

The enemy has made strong attacks for the possession of Kemmel, which was defended by the French, and against Dranoutre, which is to the south-east of Kemmel, the idea being to put a pincers on the hill and then gain the line of ridges known as Mont Noir, Mont Rouge, and the Scherpenberg, which are of great importance in that flat land of Flanders. For a time the enemy seems to have made progress, and it is now reported that he has reached the crest of Kemmel and the village of Dranoutre. If so that is grave news.

He has no fewer than seven divisions in the line and in reserve opposite this part of the Front, including the Alpine Corps and the 11th Bavarian Division, selected as mountain warriors for these molehills of Flanders, and the 56th Division, not previously engaged in any of the battles last month or this, and battalions of Jaegers. The main German thrust has come against the French up there in the north, and our left has, so far, only been lightly engaged.

Out of all this intense fighting one thing is clear, and that is that the enemy is now making slow progress and that every attack is costing him an immense price. God knows how long he will fling his men into this massacre.

VI

The Hills of Flanders

April 27

It seems to me fairly certain now that, after being thwarted in the first stupendous efforts to drive between the French and British armies by the capture of Amiens and an advance towards Abbéville, and again to smash the British Army by rolling us up from Givenchy to Arras, the enemy has decided to hurl a strong force northwards and to strike for the coast through Flanders. That, in my opinion, is the lesson to be learnt from the recent fighting between Bailleul and Wytschaete, working up on Thursday to furious assaults upon the Franco-British lines and the capture of Kemmel Hill. There cannot be much doubt as to the enemy's intention. Indeed, he has already revealed it, and a child familiar with the lie of the land in Flanders could tell what his next objectives would be. After the capture of Kemmel, which commands a wide tract of country south of Ypres, and his advance yesterday through Dranoutre to Locre, to the south-west of Kemmel, he will endeavour to pinch out the three remaining hills of the Scherpenberg, Mont Rouge, and Mont Noir, which dominate the ground south of Poperinghe.

He was already feeling his way towards the Scherpenberg yesterday afternoon, and pouring fire on that triplet of hills, until he was repulsed very bloodily for the time being by French troops. But he will attack, and is attacking, with more furious efforts, in the hope that if that high ground falls into his hands the whole of the Ypres salient

and the country around Poperinghe may become untenable. It is a big "if," which depends on the fortune of war and the result of efforts which have already cost the enemy a great price in men. As I said in my last message, the German main thrust on Thursday and Friday was directed against the French, who were defending Kemmel and Dranoutre, with British troops on their left and right. The Germans struck first on Thursday morning at the point of junction between the French and ourselves up by Maedelstede Farm, below the Petit Bois of Wytschaete, where on April 9 of last year, before the Battle of Wytschaete and Messines, we blew one of our largest mine craters with an explosion which was like an outbreak of a vast volcano, and left a yawning chasm there, down which afterwards men looked and shuddered. Here, and as far north as the ground between St.-Eloi and Vierstraat, were Scottish and British battalions, and then our line ran north-eastwards across the Ypres-Comines Canal past Hill 60—the scene of another mine explosion last year and of many previous mines, so that all the ground here was upheaved—up to high ground by Westhoek Ridge.

The German army of assault upon Kemmel and the surrounding country was under the command of General Sixt von Armin, who was our leading opponent in the long struggle of the first Somme battles, and whose clear and ruthless intelligence was revealed in the famous document summing up the first phase of that fighting, when he frankly confessed to many failures of organization and supply, but with an acute criticism which was not that of a weak or an indecisive man. He is a formidable antagonist to have against us now, and it is well to know this.

Under his command as corps commanders were Generals Sieger and von Eberhardt, and they had picked troops, including Alpine Corps and strong Bavarian and Prussian divisions specially trained for assault in such country as that of Kemmel. Their plan of attack, to strike at the points of junction between the French and ourselves east of Kem-

mel, and also at the French troops south of it near Dranoutre, proved for a time successful and by driving in wedges they were able to make us fall back on the flanks and encircle Kemmel Hill after furious and heroic fighting by the French and our own troops. Our men of the 9th Division were in weak numbers compared with the strength brought against them. Their withdrawal to new lines of defence by Vierstraat, and the furious attacks at eleven o'clock yesterday morning across the Ypres-Comines Canal gave the enemy some ground in the region of St.-Eloi, the Bluff, and the spoil-bank on the canal itself. It is villainous ground there, foul with the wreckage of old fighting, but to us out here who have followed this war from the beginning, the loss of any of it is saddening, because of so many memories of heroism and tragedy haunting each yard of earth.

British troops and Canadian troops were put to a supreme test of courage to take and hold these places. Our glorious old 3rd Division, commanded in those days of 1915 and 1916 by General Haldane, fought from St.-Eloi to the Bluff, month in and month out, and lost many gallant officers and men there after acts of courage which belong to history. Their graves were marked by white crosses, which grew too fast in this strentch of barren and mangled earth. And I remember with what emotion we went about these places after the Battle of Wytschaete, when the enemy was hurled back, and it seemed as though an evil spell had been lifted from them. The Bluff is just a heap of earth piled up on the bank when the canal was dug. St.-Eloi, which the Germans still speak of as a village, has for years been nothing but a name and a muck-heap and linked pits made by big shell-bursts.

One of the enemy's most desperate efforts was against the French in the village of Locre, north of Dranoutre, and below the old hill of the Scherpenberg, where in days gone by distinguished visitors have stood to watch our

shelling of Wytschaete, so that the wife of the miller, who was a chatty soul, had illustrious acquaintances, including kings and princes.

Yesterday that hill was under intense fire, as for some days previously, when some friends of mine whom I met there last had very lucky and sensational escapes. When the Germans advanced through a gap at Dranoutre the French had terrible fighting in Locre, during which they inflicted frightful losses on the enemy. Before the assault on this village the enemy overwhelmed it with a bombardment and destroyed many houses which were still standing, though more than a week ago the streets were burning, as I saw them at the same time as Bailleul was in flames. German storm troops made three violent attacks on Locre, which were flung back by the French with heavy casualties among the enemy, and it was only at the fourth attempt, with fresh reserves, that they were able to enter the ruins of the village, from which the French then fell back in order to reorganize for the counter-attack. This they launched to-day at an early hour, and now Locre is in their hands, after close fighting in which they slew numbers of the enemy.

After their success on Thursday, when they captured Kemmel, the Germans have made little progress, and though there was fierce fighting all day yesterday they failed to gain their objectives, and were raked by fire hour after hour, so that a large number of their dead lie on the field of battle. At four in the afternoon they engaged in a fresh assault upon our positions near Ridge Wood, to which we had fallen back, but English and Scottish troops of the 21st, 25th, and 9th Divisions repulsed them and shattered their waves. It was a bad day for them, because of these great losses. We have broken the fighting quality of some of the enemy's most renowned regiments, so that they must be taken out and reorganized before they can come into battle again.

SUNDAY

THERE was no general action in Flanders yesterday, and to-day so far there is no extended battle, but the enemy has been engaging some of our outpost lines, and there has been local fighting of a severe nature against the French troops around Locre and ours round Vormezeele, which is a well-known halting place south of Ypres, and in the old days the ultimate spot to which our transport could go without certain destruction. Both these places have changed hands several times during the past two or three days, but Locre now seems to be with the French again.

The Buffs and Berkshires fought hard to hold the Bluff, while between Vierstraat and Ridge Wood a gallant defence has been made by Scottish Rifles and South Africans and other troops against repeated German attacks.

All the roads and camps around Ypres are under heavy harassing fire once more, and Ypres itself is being savagely bombarded by high-explosive and gas shells, so that after months of respite those poor ruins are again under that black spell which makes them the most sinister place in the world. "Suicide Corner" has come into its own again, and old unhealthy plague spots up by the canal are under fire. The enemy's guns are reaching out to fields and villages hitherto untouched by fire, and these harassing shots, intended perhaps to catch the traffic on the roads or soldiers' camps, often serve the enemy no more than by the death of innocent women and children. A day or two ago a monstrous shell fell just outside a little Flemish cottage, tucked away in an angle of the road, which I often pass, and scooped out a deep pit in the garden without even scarring the cottage walls. But two children were playing in the garden, and they were laid dead beside the flower bed.

Along the line the enemy's losses in this continual fighting have been severe, and we have been able to get the actual figures of some of their casualties, which are typical of the more general effect of our fire.

One company of the 7th German Division, which fought

at St.-Eloi on Friday, has only forty men remaining out of its full strength of 120. The 4th Ersatz Division has lost most heavily, and a prisoner of the 279th Pioneer Company, which relieved the 360th Regiment of that division, says that the average company strength was fifteen. An entire regimental staff was killed by a direct hit of one of our shells on their headquarters dug-out near Cantieux. The same thing has happened to the battalion headquarters of the 223rd Regiment, which is now in a state of low moral, having been fearfully cut up. The 1st Guards Reserve Regiment, of the 1st Guards Division, which was much weakened in the fighting on the Somme, and was afterwards sent to La Bassée, lost thirty-six officers, including the regimental commander and one battalion commander.

These losses are affecting inevitably the outlook of the German troops on the prospects of their continued offensive. Prisoners from divisions which have suffered most, confess that they have no further enthusiasm for fighting, and their regiments can only be made to attack by stern discipline and the knowledge that they must fight on or be shot for desertion.

On the other hand, the best German troops, especially those now attacking us in Flanders, like the Alpine Corps and the 11th Bavarian Division, are elated and full of warlike spirit, and even their prisoners profess to believe that they are winning the war, and will have a German peace before the year is out. The enemy's state of mind is largely dependent on shell-fire. Fresh divisions newly brought up are proud and optimistic and fierce in attack, but after two or three days' hammering by our great gunfire their optimism falls from them, and they become gloomy prophets and the horror of war closes down on them. Most of their gaps due to casualties are being filled up by the 1919 class. These young boys are unable, so far, to bear the strain of bombardments, and they break very easily under their terror and shock.

Apart from the fighting in Flanders there was an important little action on Friday at Givenchy, where some of our troops made an attack in the afternoon on a 700 yards' line of old craters formerly in our front line, east and north-east of Givenchy village. German possession of these pits is annoying to our men, because the enemy has observation of our positions from crater lips and snipes us with rifle and indirect machine-gun fire. The bottoms of the pits are dry, and although the enemy has to approach them overland, through boggy places, he has good cover and room for assembly when he gets into them and into the old mining galleries which lead from them. Our men, on Thursday night, had already raided the German trenches south of Givenchy village, and under protection of the barrage killed a number of the enemy and brought back prisoners. On Friday our troops captured the craters after hard fighting, and sent back fifty prisoners, mostly wounded; but the 1st Guards' Division counter-attacked immediately and there was severe fighting until darkness, when our men withdrew, after smashing up the German defensive system.

The artillery on both sides is bombarding heavily in this sector, and our guns have inflicted terrible casualties by fire on German troops and transport behind their lines.

Meanwhile the storm clouds of battle are gathering steadily in Flanders, rather than on these southern sectors, and it is there in my opinion that other great actions may be expected. The French are with us there in strength, and the appearance of these blue-coats, older on the average than our boys, harder-looking because of their moustaches and their more solid figures, imperturbable under the harassing fire that is being flung about the roads and fields, continues our confidence that we shall break the enemy yet. I have been to-day and yesterday among these French troops, and have seen, or fancied I saw, upon the roads old friends of mine, or the spirit of those old friends, the gallant D'Artagnan and the elegant Aramis, and the noble Athos and Porthos, who loved good fighting and good

wine, for the old types of France are here among our khaki lads, the old gallantry of a fighting race, the sentiment and the soul of France.

Many of these men are dirty and dusty after long forced marches, but one sees fine gentlemen among them, unshaven but with a beautiful courtesy, and the true descendants of such men as Le Balafré, whom Quentin Durward knew, and of Bertrand du Guesclin, who was *sans peur et sans reproche.*

April 26

It was not pleasant in Flanders this morning. I went up there, after yesterday on the Somme, to get details of the French and British fighting round Kemmel, and I am bound to say that though I have seen Flanders in every kind of foul weather I have never seen it more sinister-looking, more utterly evil in atmosphere and spiritual effect, than it was to-day. Thick wet fog enveloped all the flat fields like the London "particular" at its worst, and French and British columns, with their transport and guns, moved through it like ghosts in shadow-world.

On to the Mont des Cats, that high hill on our side of Kemmel, upon which and round which by Boeschepe and Dickebusch and Godewaersvelde and Westoutre—strange names to you, but as familiar as Clapham Junction or Peckham Rye or the Old Kent Road to all our soldiers out here—the enemy has been scattering heavy shells and flinging harassing fire. Over all their fields was wreathed round with clouds of fog, through which the great old monastery where Trappist monks used to live in silence before the tumult of war surrounded them in the autumn of the first year of war, loomed vaguely like a mediæval castle. Roads down which we used to go with an admirable sense of safety, even when the Ypres salient was full of menace—alas, the menace has come again—bore signs to-day of recent and horrid happenings. Little wooden houses built by refugees from Ypres after the day of terror there in April

1915, and filled with stores which our troops used to buy on the way past had been knocked to matchwood by shell-fire, and all about them were deep shell-holes newly made, with that beastly freshness which warns one that others may come. All the fields for miles around were punctured by pits made by German shells. It was yesterday that the enemy's gunners flung about most of these shells. They had a kind of devil's orgy of shelling, and scattered high explosives any old where without aim or object except that of harassing the whole region. They turned long-range guns on to villages far behind the lines to catch an old woman or two or smash up an infants' school. They fired off the map at poor old Poperinghe again—"Pop," as we call it by long familiarity, with its tall spired church and Grande Place and narrow streets—and they put high explosives into Westoutre and made targets of "Bosheep" and "Gerty Wears Velvet," which, by those who can pronounce them, are called Boeschepe and Godewaersvelde.

All this was just the gentle embroidery of the decorative scheme of death which had been planned for the central plan round Kemmel Hill. Kemmel Hill was held by the French, as I have previously told—those gallant men who came up so quickly to our relief when we needed them, and took their places in the line without delay after long marches. On the left of them yesterday were Scottish and English battalions. After several attempts against Kemmel, frustrated, as I recorded at the time, the enemy went all out yesterday to capture this position. Four divisions at least, including the Alpine Corps, the 11th Bavarians, the 56th, and 170th, were moved against Kemmel in the early morning fog after a tremendous bombardment of the Franco-British positions. It was a bombardment that began before the first glimmer of dawn, like one of those which we used to arrange in the days of our great Flanders battles last year. It came down swamping Kemmel Hill, so that it was like one volcano and stretching away

on to our lines on the left of the French by Maedelstede Farm and Grand Bois down to Vierstraat.

Then German infantry attacked in depth battalion behind battalion, division behind division, and their mountain troops, of the Alpine Corps and Jaegers and Bavarians, came on first in the assault of Kemmel Hill, which is not much more than a hillock, though it looms large in Flanders and in this war.

The French had suffered a terrible ordeal of fire, and the main thrust of the German strength was against them. The enemy struck in two directions to encircle the hill and village of Kemmel, one arrow-head striking to Dranoutre and the other at the point of the junction between the French and British northwards. In each case, favoured by fog and the effect of their gun-fire, they were able to drive in a wedge, which they pushed forward until they had caused gaps. The French on Kemmel Hill became isolated, and there was a gulf between us and the French, and between the French left and right. On the hill the French garrison fought with splendid heroism. These men, when quite surrounded, would not yield, but served their machine-guns and rifles for many hours, determined to hold the position at all costs and to the death. Small parties of them on the west of the hill held out until midday or beyond, according to reports of our airmen, who flew low over them; but by nine o'clock in the morning, owing to gaps made by the enemy, the main French line was compelled to draw back from Kemmel. They inflicted severe losses on the enemy as they fell back, and thwarted his efforts to break their line on new defensive positions.

Meanwhile a body of our Scottish troops of the 9th Division were seriously involved. Some of their officers whom I saw to-day tell me that the fog was so thick—as on March 21—that after a terrific bombardment the first thing known at some points a little way behind the line was when the Germans were all round them.

One officer I know was sleeping after an all-night vigil,

when he heard German voices and rifle shots, and jumped out of his dug-out to see the Germans on the side of a little stream, only a few yards away. He was on the same side of this brook, and they could have grabbed him by one pounce, but he leapt across the stream, and by some wonderful luck escaped their sniping shots and got away. Royal Scots and Black Watch fought hard, and did not yield ground until the price had been paid for it. The enemy seems to have paid his usual price, which is not cheap. A machine-gun officer whom I know well tells me that one section fired 1100 rounds at massed bodies of Germans who were checked against our wire, and they fell in heaps. This friend of mine himself had fearful experiences yesterday after many heroic days before, but his great grief is that his horse, which he has had out in this war since 1914, was killed by a shell.

The Camerons fought like tigers yesterday. For some little time they had not come in actual touch with the enemy, but yesterday they had this chance, and made the most of it. They were heavily attacked in the morning up in the neighbourhood of the Damstrasse—that street of concrete shelters which I described last year, when we captured it in the battles of Flanders. From eleven o'clock in the morning until half-past five in the evening they kept this position, killing the enemy waves every time they tried to advance. It was decided to withdraw our line to Vierstraat, and orders were sent up to the Camerons to conform to this, but the message did not reach them for some time, and they still went on fighting for three hours more, or at least until after eight o'clock, when they fell back to join up with the rest of the line. All the afternoon and evening the enemy endeavoured to smash through the line established by Vierstraat to Beaver Corner, but Scots and English repelled him with heavy losses, and the Black Watch made a fierce counter-attack, in which they took fifty-six prisoners.

A combined counter-attack of French and British troops

was made this morning when English battalions advanced from the north, and after gallant efforts gained an entry into Kemmel village, and sent back a considerable number of prisoners, whom I met this morning on their way back. They were a good-looking body of troops, some of them very tall men and belonging to picked regiments of Alpine and Bavarian divisions. But they had a worn and haggard look, and many of them marched as though dazed by their day and night of fighting. Unfortunately our battalions of the 25th Division who entered Kemmel village came under wicked machine-gun fire, and could not maintain their hold on the recaptured ground, though they did not lose all of it, and I believe they are still further than their original line last night. The French on our right were unable to make substantial progress. This situation in Flanders is still serious, and the enemy may endeavour to exploit his advance at Kemmel by a great concentration of strength and more violent attacks. But the French Army, as well as ours, is now barring his way, and all our men have intense confidence in the superb regiments of France who are now fighting with us. I saw thousands of them to-day in the fields and farms and villages, and the spirit of these sturdy men seemed to disperse some of the gloomy fog about them and uplift one's heart. For they have the look of great soldiers, hard and fined down by these years of war, and they are inspired by a most grim resolve. The people of Northern France, who have not seen much of their men for three years, greet them with cries of *Bonne chance!* and wave their hands to them from cottage doors.

And now I must add a few words about the situation down south at Villers-Bretonneux, which I described yesterday at some length. I told how pockets of German machine-gunners were still fighting in that village. Last night these were all routed out, and all the village is now in our hands, and our Australian troops have joined up the gap which existed for a time between them.

There is no doubt that I under-estimated the losses of the

enemy yesterday. The Australians say they have never seen so many German dead, except at Polygon Wood, where there was a massacre of the enemy. Our light Tanks, which got among two battalions near Cachy, slaughtered whole companies as though they were Juggernauts, sweeping the enemy with fire before they could attempt to disperse, and trampling them down. It was a ghastly business, and these Tanks when they came back had to be cleansed of their blood. The Tanks employed by the enemy yesterday are heavier than ours, and, according to Australians, seem to be about 36 feet long, 12 feet high, and 12 feet broad, with a central turret. Their caterpillar tracks pass round several pairs of wheels, and they look like enormous turtles or inverted basins. But they are very slow. One of them bore on its steel shield the emblem of the skull and crossbones, and another carried the name of Cyclops. They are armed with a small gun, about 2-inch calibre, and some six machine-guns. They seem to have been handled by scratch crews, who had not been trained with them, and owing to the secrecy with which these Tanks were enveloped, no German infantry had seen one of them before, and were untrained in fighting with them. Two of them fled at once when encountered by ours, but our troops were unable to get possession of them.

Many of the prisoners speak with disgust of their command in ordering the attack on Villers-Bretonneux without sufficient artillery support, and they say they suffered hideously from gas, with which we soaked the village after their capture of it. They were utterly surprised by our counter-attack, and some of them were got in cellars, while still ignorant of their change of fortune. The most intelligent of these prisoners all show signs of uneasiness about the future of the German offensive, and do not disguise that, in spite of the gain of ground, they are uncertain of ultimate victory, and speak like men who see some dark omens ahead. They are puzzled by the failure of the U-boat war to stop American transports, and when asked

why that was so, said, very simply, "That is exactly what we want to know." There were other things they wanted to know, and because they do not know they have black forebodings.

APRIL 29

IT becomes clearer every hour that the enemy has suffered a disastrous defeat to-day. Attack after attack has been smashed up by our artillery and infantry of the 21st, 25th, and 49th Divisions, and he has not made a foot of ground on the British front.

The Border Regiment of the 25th Division this morning repulsed four heavy assaults on the Kemmel—La-Clytte road, where there was extremely hard fighting, and destroyed the enemy each time. One of the enemy's main thrusts was between the Scherpenberg and Mont Rouge, where they made a wedge for a time and captured the cross-roads, and it was here that a gallant French counter-attack swept them back.

We had no more than a post or two in Voormezeele this morning, and the enemy was there in greater strength and sent his storm troops through this place, but was never able to advance against the fire of our English battalions. His losses began yesterday when his troops were seen massing on the road between Zillebeke and Ypres in dense fog, through which he attempted to make a surprise attack. This was observed by our low-flying planes, and his assembly was shattered by our gun-fire. After fierce shelling all night, so tremendous along the whole northern front that the countryside was shaken by its tumult, German troops again assembled in the early morning mist, but were caught once more in our bombardment. At three o'clock a tremendous barrage was flung down by German gunners from Ypres to Bailleul, and later they began the battle by launching the first attack between Zillebeke Lake and Meteren. South of Ypres they crossed the Yser Canal by Lock 8 near Voormezeele, which was their direct

of attack against us, while they tried to drive up past Locre against the French on the three hills.

Our successful defence has made the day most bloody for many German regiments.

There was violent and widespread gun-fire all last night from the enemy's batteries, from the Belgian front down through Flanders to the districts about Béthune, and this morning the German bombardment intensified to heights of fury all round Ypres, and upon our lines near Voormezeele and Vierstraat, and against the French front west of Kemmel Hill to the country south of Dranoutre, where British troops join them again. Then began, at about six o'clock this morning, that attack which was the inevitable plan of General Sixt von Armin after the capture of Kemmel Hill.. That is, an attempt in strong force to gain the chain of hillocks running westwards below Ypres and Poperinghe, and known to all of us as familiar landmarks—the Scherpenberg, Mont Rouge, and Mont Noir.

These hills, forming the Central Keep as it were in our defensive lines south of Ypres, are held by the French, and are of great tactical importance at the present moment, so that the enemy covets them and is ready to sacrifice thousands of men to get them. In order to turn them if frontal attacks failed against the French, German storm troops—they are now called *grosskampf,* or great offensive troops —were to break the British lines on the French left between Locre and Voormezeele, and on the French right near Merris and Meteren. That obviously was the intention of the German High Command this morning, judging from their direction of assault. So far they have failed utterly. They have failed up to this afternoon to break or bend the British wings on the French centre, and they have failed to capture the hills or any one of them defended by French divisions. They have attacked again and again since this morning's dawn, heavy forces of German infantry being sent forward after their first waves against the Scherpenberg and Voormezeele, which lies to

the east of Dickebusch Lake, but these men have been slaughtered by French and British fire, and have made no important progress at any point.

For a time the situation seemed critical at one or two points, and it was reported that the Germans had been seen storming the slopes of Mont Rouge and Mont Noir, but one of our airmen flew over those hills at 200 feet above their crests and could see no German infantry near them.

Round about Voormezeele North Country and other English battalions of the 49th Division, which had been fighting marvellously for many days in the attacks on Neuve Eglise, had to sustain determined and furious efforts of Alpine and Bavarian troops to drive through them by weight of numbers after hours of intense bombardment, but our men held their ground and inflicted severe punishment upon the enemy. All through the day the German losses have been heavy under field-gun and machine-gun fire, and our batteries alongside the French 75's swept down the enemy's advancing waves and his assemblies in support at short range. There is no doubt that the French guarding the three hills have fought with extreme valour and skill. For a brief period the Germans were apparently able to draw near and take some ground near Locre, but an immediate counter-attack was organized by the French general, and the line of French troops swung forward and swept the enemy back. Further attacks by the Germans north of Ypres and on the Belgian front was repulsed easily, and again the enemy lost many men. The battle continues, but the first phase of it has been decided in our favour, and it has been another day of sacrifice for the German regiments, who one by one, as they come up fresh to reinforce their battle-line, lose a high percentage of their strength in this continuing slaughter.

The German High Command still has many divisions untouched, but their turn will come, and if, as to-day, they are spent without great gain, the enemy's plans of a decisive victory will be thwarted for ever. There is a limit even to

German man-power, and surely to God their people will tire of making these fields of France and Flanders the graveyard of their youth. This frenzy must pass from them and from our stricken world when the truth comes home to them at last.

APRIL 30

GOOD news travels as fast as bad out here, and yesterday evening, as well as this morning, in Flanders there were general expressions of gladness behind the lines because the enemy's fierce attacks had been utterly crushed.

"The enemy took the knock yesterday," said a staff officer, who had been working all that day and most of the night, but was in high spirits this morning.

"Some of his best divisions," said another, "have got badly chipped against a hard wall," and then he said, with a queer laugh, "the dirty dogs."

Good words were said about our own divisions who bore the brunt of this fighting—the 21st, the 49th, and the 25th—all of whom have had much hard work of late, and have been sticking it out in one battle after another.

There are Northumberland and other troops in the 21st Division, and the 49th Division contains mostly Yorkshire troops, who have done some stubborn fighting since April 9, and helped to retake Neuve Eglise no fewer than four times in the bitter struggle for that place on the east side of Bailleul.

The 25th Division are the men who fought grim rear-guard actions when the enemy broke through the Portuguese, and with our 50th Division and others, held on to the last possible hours on the Lys and by Neuf Berquin and up by Steenwerck, when the enemy came driving ahead in his first bull rush for Armentières and Bailleul.

Many civilians as well as soldiers had heard the news last night, and it meant much to them—the difference between quick flight from places menaced by any new German advance and a chance of staying in their homes, the

difference between a long trek to an unknown country, leaving all their little property behind them, and the hope, at least, of clinging on to their farms and homesteads on the edge of war. . . . I walked out last evening to a place from which one can see the long sweep of our Flemish battlefields round Ypres to Bailleul. There below me were outspread all the long, straight roads with avenues of poplars which I have been travelling these three and a half years past, and the neat fields of Flanders, with red-tiled cottages and church spires and orchards white with blossom, and old windmills, whose sails have turned to the wind of many centuries.

This countryside was designed for peace and the sowing and reaping of grain, but since the war began the horizon has been on fire beyond it, and last night this shell-fire was bursting close, in fields untouched before by any steel unkinder than the plough, and along roads which until a week or two ago were safe highways this side of Poperinghe and Ypres.

A Flemish woman stood by her cottage wall staring out upon the scene as though searching for any sign which might give her hope. Her eyes were sombre, and she had such a tragic look that she seemed to me a typical figure of Flemish womanhood looking out towards the battle-line which has drawn closer to their lives, so that many of them have been caught up in it or have fled from its engulfing terror.

Down below her, a few hundred yards away, was the ruin of a small house smashed to matchwood the night before. German shells were bursting with heavy clumping noises in hamlets near by, and our guns in the fields below were flashing and winking through the evening mists, and all the sky caught up the thunderous rumblings of great drumfire away beyond the Mont des Cats and the Scherpenberg.

"Have the Germans still possession of Mont Kemmel?" asked the peasant woman, and I said, "Yes, but they have

been defeated to-day." "That is good news," she said. "Perhaps we shall be able to stay here after all. They tell me the French have driven them out of Locre again."

In England this news will seem good. People will say, "We seem to have done well yesterday." But out here it means more than that to people whose lives and homes are threatened by any German advance. To them every act in this frightful drama is enormously significant, and every place which strangers puzzle out on the map is to them a village where they lived as children, where their sisters or children dwell or where they have left all their properties. I write these things because they humanize map names, and show how the valour of men is the safeguard of the folk on the edge of the fighting-fields. It was the valour of Frenchmen as well as Englishmen which yesterday inflicted defeat upon many German divisions, and the Allies fought side by side, and their batteries fired from the same fields, and their wounded came back along the same roads, and khaki and blue lay out upon the same brown earth.

I have already given an outline of yesterday's battle, how, after a colossal bombardment, the German attack begun early in the morning from north of Ypres to the south of Voormezeele, where English battalions held the lines, and from La-Clytte past the three hills—the Scherpenberg, Mont Rouge, and Mont Noir—which French troops held, to the north of Meteren, where the English joined them again; how the English lines held firm against desperate assaults until late in the evening; and how the enemy made a great thrust against the French, driving in for a time between the Scherpenberg and Mont Noir until flung back by the French counter-attack.

It was here, by Hyde Park Corner, that a very gallant action was done by an officer of a French regiment. The enemy had driven in a wedge at ten minutes past ten, and was on the southern slopes of Scherpenberg, where small parties of Germans were endeavouring to secure a footing.

By 12.30 in the afternoon the French line was still intact northwards, but had slightly withdrawn towards Scherpenberg and Mont Rouge when the situation was dangerous though not critical.

A counter-attack was being prepared by the French Headquarters Staff, but was unnecessary, owing to the fine initiative of regimental officers who realized the position locally and dealt with it without waiting for supports. One of them gathered some of his men together, and at about 5.30 in the afternoon said, "Eh, bien, mes enfants, suivez moi!" and led these little groups of "Poilus" in a quick attack against the German machine-guns and outposts holding Hyde Park Corner. They went forward with fixed bayonets, their steel helmets thrust back from their foreheads, and hoarse cheers and shouts, following the officer who led them. At Hyde Park Corner many Germans fell, and the rest fled.

An action as gallant as this, very like it in idea and execution, was done by another French officer with a group of picked men in Locre. That village, where I have been held up scores of times in the traffic which used to surge round the corners by the church and our officers' club and divisional headquarters, was yesterday a charred ruin, with shell-broken streets littered with dead, in which German machine-gunners hid and kept up a chattering fire, very deadly to face by men fighting into the village.

During the past week Locre has changed hands several times, and yesterday at least four times again. The French infantry were forced to retire under pressure of the German assaults, but each time they came back again with grim determination to remain and rout their enemy out. All day there was this struggle, small bodies of men with machine-guns and rifles fighting against each other under the cover of walls and barricades of timber. In the evening the enemy was in possession again, but did not have lodgings for the night there.

A French officer, like that other one at Hyde Park Cor-

ner, gathered some hard fellows about him, and said, "Now let us take back Locre before it is too dark." They worked their way through the village right to the other side of it, killing some of the enemy and taking some prisoners, and then, just to show that Locre was very much theirs, walked down the road to Dranoutre, and only stopped when they met their own barrage-line of bursting shells.

In the night the French, who had now regained all the ground that had been temporarily in the enemy's hands, made a general counter-attack and succeeded in advancing their line to a depth of about 1500 yards beyond the line of the three hills, which thereby are made more secure against future assaults.

Meanwhile throughout the day English battalions had been sustaining heavy asaults and breaking the enemy against their front. The Leicesters especially, with the Lincolns and Yorks of the 21st Division, had fierce fighting about Voormezeele, where, as I told yesterday, the enemy was in the centre of the village.

German storm troops advanced against our men here and along other parts of the line with fixed bayonets, but in most places, except at Voormezeele, where there was close fighting, they were mown down by Lewis gun-fire before they could get near. Line after line of them came on, but lost heavily and fell back.

Over the ground east of Dickebusch Lake the West Yorks and the Yorks and Lancs of the 49th Division saw these groups of field-grey men advancing upon them and the glint of their bayonets, wet in the morning mist, and swept them with bullets from Lewis guns and rifles until many bodies were lying out there on the mud flats in the old Ypres salient.

The most determined assaults were concentrated upon the 25th Division, but it held firm and would not budge, though the men had been under fearful fire in the night

bombardment, and their machine-gunners kept their triggers pressed, and bullets played upon the advancing Germans like a garden hose. The troops in the whole division yielded not a yard of ground, and they hold that they killed as many Germans as any battalions in this battle, which was a black day for Germany.

More than ten German divisions, probably thirteen, seem to have been engaged in this attempt to smash our lines and encircle the three hills. They included some of the enemy's finest divisions, so that they have lost quality as well as quantity in this futile sacrifice of man-power—man-power which seems to mean nothing in flesh and blood and heart and soul to men like Lüdendorff, but is treated as material force, like guns and ammunition, and used as cannon-fodder.

Some of our brigades saw the German Red Cross at work during the day coming close behind the lines with their wagons flying the burning emblem of love—a frightful irony on the field of battle, except for the devotion of the men who labour under this sign of truce—and with crowds of stretcher-bearers who went a-gleaning on those muddy fields. They had a great harvest of wounded.

To-day again I have been among thousands of French soldiers, and it is splendid to see them because of their fine bearing. They are men in the prime of life, not so young as some of ours, and with a graver look than one sees on our boys' faces when they have not yet reached the zone of fire. They are men who have seen all that war means during these years of agony and hope and boredom and death. They have no illusions. They stare into the face of truth unflinchingly and shrug their shoulders at its worst menace, and still have faith in victory. So I read them, if any man may read, the thoughts that lie behind those bronzed faces with dark eyes and upturned moustaches, under the blue painted helmets or black tam o' shanter. They are not gay or boisterous in their humour, and they

do not sing like our men as they march, but they seem to have been born to this war, and its life is their life, and they are professionals.

There are wonderful pictures as they pass everywhere, and if I were an artist instead of a writing man my fingers would itch for pencil or brush to draw these groups, these columns on the march, these splendid types of France. Some of their horses are lean and long-tailed like those in the battle pictures of Detaille, and many of their transport wagons are spider-wheeled below their blue boards, and frail compared with our own lorries. The gunners who ride behind their batteries thrust their hands deep into the pockets of their long blue overcoats, and have their rifles slung behind their backs, and on the gun-limbers behind heavy howitzers, or long-barrelled high-velocity fellows, or the dainty little *soixante-quinze,* which kills men delicately and with artistry, three fellows sit hunched together, with their heads nodding after an all-night march, or staring with curious eyes at our transport and traffic. Across the guns themselves men sit astraddle, and I saw one fellow to-day, a handsome fellow with an actor's face, reading a book of poetry in this position, oblivious of the world of fact about him. In any marching column or in any field where French troops are halted there is always a wagon with wine barrels, for the "Poilu" has a daily ration of wine, and his spirits rise at the journey's end when he washes down his parched and dusty throat with a drop of "Pinard," as he calls it in his slang. The tricolour passes along the roads of France and Flanders, and French trumpets ring out across the flat fields below the Scherpenberg, and all the spirit of French fighting men, who have proved themselves great soldiers in this war, as for a thousand years of history, is mingled with our own battalions, and our men exchange Virginia cigarettes for Caporals. Together yesterday they gave the German army a hard knock.

MAY 1

THE Germans are quiet in their lines since they were repulsed so utterly in their attacks against the Scherpenberg and our lines round Ypres. Even their guns were not very active last night and to-day. They are burying their dead and getting back their wounded, and taking broken divisions out of the line to replace them with fresh troops for another battle. I believe that will happen, because now that the enemy has Kemmel Hill his temptation to seize the three hills below is predominant, and there is no doubt that he will again risk the loss of many men to gain these positions. From the political point of view Ypres is also a lure to him, and there would be a great blowing of trumpets in Germany if their troops could capture that city of the salient, which, as a name and a ruin, is a great shrine of the British Army in this war. Now that the French are with us to strengthen our own defensive power, which has sustained such furious onslaughts by over 100 German divisions since six weeks ago, the next battle in Flanders may not give the enemy any further ground than the day before yesterday, which was nothing at all, and it is certain anyhow that not a yard of it will be yielded until the next waves of German soldiers have paid great sums of life.

In the last battle two additional divisions have now been identified as having been put in against the British front in Flanders, one being the 117th near Voormezeele, and the other the 3rd Guards Division, including the Maikaefer, or Cockchafers, whom Welsh regiments shattered at Pilkem last year, and who have fought against us in the Cambrai salient. Last night when, no doubt, German reliefs were in progress, our guns turned loose with shrapnel and high explosives upon the transport, and troops crowding the track from Vierstraat to Wytschaete, and this morning the enemy had more dead to bury. So the slaughter goes on.

During a rare day without great news there is an opportunity of writing a few words about some of our bat-

talions who in the earlier fighting during these recent battles were wonderful in courage and endurance and self-sacrifice, but have not yet appeared in our narratives, because, for the time, it was inadvisable to mention their presence in our battle-line. They are battalions of the Guards. There is no need for secrecy now because the enemy met them at close quarters, and knows how these men fought—sometimes in small bodies almost to the last man.

The recent history of the Guards begins with the Battle of Arras on March 28, when the 56th (London) Division and the 15th (Scottish), and the grand old 3rd Division made such a wonderful stand against one of the biggest efforts of the enemy.

On the 28th and the 30th the Guards were heavily attacked, and beat off the enemy's storm troops with exceedingly great losses to them, the Grenadiers making a counter-attack near Boileux St.-Marc with fixed bayonets, flinging the enemy back from the ground they had gained. But later than that battalions of Guards have been fighting in the North, around the Forest of Nieppe and between Lepinette and Vieux Berquin. That was from April 11 to 14, after the Germans had broken through the Portuguese line and, with the full weight of their forces, endeavoured to widen the gap—did, indeed, widen the gap, pushing up between Armentières and Merville by gaining the crossings of the Lys. Grenadier, Irish, and Coldstream Guards were sent forward along the Hazebrouck-Estaires road when the situation was at its worst, when the men of our 15th Division and other units had fought themselves out in continual rear-guard and holding actions, so that some of those still in the line could hardly walk or stand, and when it was utterly necessary to keep the Germans in check until a body of Australian troops had time to arrive. The Guards were asked to hold back the enemy until those Australians came, and to fight at all costs for forty-eight hours against the German tide of men and guns

which was attempting to flow round our other hard-pressed men. And that is what the Guards did. Fighting in separate bodies, with the enemy pressing in on both flanks, greatly outnumbered, they beat back attack after attack and gained precious hours—vital hours—by the most noble self-sacrifice. A party of Grenadiers were so closely surrounded that their officer sent back a message, saying, "My men are standing back to back shooting on all sides." The Germans swung round them, circling them with machine-guns and rifles, and pouring fire into them until only eighteen men were left. Those eighteen, standing among their wounded and their dead, did not surrender. The Army wanted forty-eight hours. They fixed bayonets and went out against the enemy and drove through him. A wounded corporal of the Grenadiers who afterwards got back to our lines lay in a ditch, and the last he saw of his comrades was when fourteen men of them were still fighting in a swarm of Germans.

The Coldstream Guards were surrounded in the same way, and fought in the same way. The Army had asked for forty-eight hours until the Australians could come, and many of the Coldstreamers eked out the time with their lives. The enemy filtered in on their flanks, came crawling round them with machine-guns, sniped them from short range, raked them from ditches and upheaved earth. The Coldstream Guards had to fall back, but they fought back in small groups, facing all ways, making gaps in the enemy ranks, not firing wildly, but using every round of small-arms ammunition to keep a German back and gain a little more time. One private of the Coldstreamers remained in an outpost until every one of his comrades was dead or wounded, and for twenty minutes after that—twenty minutes of those forty-eight hours—kept the Germans back with his rifle until he was killed by a bomb. Forty-eight hours is a long time in a war like this. For two days and nights the Guards stemmed the tide of the enemy's advance.

The Irish Guards, who had come up to support the Grenadiers and Coldstreamers, tried to make a defensive flank, but the enemy worked past their right and attacked them on two sides. The Irish Guards were gaining time. They knew that was all they could do—just drag out the hours by buying each minute with their blood. One man fell, and then another, but minutes were gained, and quarter-hours, and hours. Small parties of them lowered their bayonets and went out among the grey wolves, swarming round them, and killed a number of them until they also fell. First one party and then another of these Irish Guards made those bayonet charges against men with machine-guns and volleys of rifle-fire. They bought time at a high price, but they did not stint themselves nor stop their bidding because of its costliness. The Brigade of Guards here near Vieux Berquin held out for those forty-eight hours, and some of them were fighting still when the Australians arrived according to the time-table.

I have told the story briefly and baldly, though every word I have written holds the thread of a noble and tragic episode. One day some soldier of the Guards will write it as he lived through it, and that saving of forty-eight hours outside the Forest of Nieppe shall never be forgotten.

VII

The French in Flanders

May 3

I went yesterday among some of the French troops who on April 29 inflicted a severe defeat on Sixt von Armin's storm troops between Dranoutre and Locre—when our own divisions to the north and south shared the honour of the day with them—and before that for six days in front of Kemmel Hill held their lines with most noble courage under a frightful fire that hardly ever slackened when Kemmel

had been turned and captured, and these men whom I met were almost surrounded, so that they had to fight with long enduring devotion, with great sacrifices, to maintain their positions.

It is a moving narrative as I heard it yesterday from these French officers who lived through that fearful week. The glory of the simple soldiers of France was there in those Flemish fields, and when they were ordered to hold on at all costs they obeyed to the death.

"We were asked to hold our line," said the colonel of one of these French regiments. "We held it."

His hand trembled for a moment as he touched a packet of papers, his orders during the battle, and told me how each message there had been carried through frightful fire by his runners, so that many of them were killed, and of his other losses in officers and men. But then this square-built man, with grizzled eyebrows and moustache, and blue-grey eyes that had steady light in them, said again "We held our line."

His regiment came up from Alsace to Flanders. They were hardened fellows, who had been through many battles. They were heroes of Fleury, near Verdun, when the Crown Prince's army was broken against their defence after desperate assaults; and yesterday, when I saw them marching through Flemish villages, I was stirred by the sight of them because of their grim keen look. They are young men, but veterans. War has set its seal on them as on all men who have passed through its fire, but has not weakened them.

On the morning of the 24th the German bombardment was intensified and spread over a deep area, destroying villages, tearing up roads, making black vomit of the harrowed fields. Dranoutre, Locre, Westoutre, and other small towns were violently bombarded. That night the French discovered that the Germans were preparing an attack for next morning, to be preceded by a gas bombardment. Officers warned all their men, and they stood on the

alert, with their gas-masks, when at 3.30 in the morning thousands of gas shells fell over them, mixed with high explosives of all calibres up to monster 12 inches, which burst like volcanic eruptions. In the intensity of the bombardment several officers who had fought at Fleury, said, "This is the most frightful thing we have seen. Verdun was nothing to it."

All the French troops jammed on their gas-masks—lighter things than ours, without nose tubes or chest bag, but very effective—and on one day they put them on fifty times, only removing them when the wind, which was fairly strong, blew away the poison fumes, until other storms of shells came, and for nearly a week wearing them constantly, sleeping in them, officers giving orders in them, men fighting and dying in them, charging with the bayonet in them. It was worth the trouble and the suffering, for this French regiment, between Locre and Dranoutre, had only twelve gas casualties.

That morning the German attack fell first on Kemmel Hill, which they turned from the north, and two hours later, the bombardment continuing all along the line, they developed a strong attack against Dranoutre, in the south, in order to take Locre, and turn the French right. Until evening troops on Kemmel Hill, with a small body of our own men, I am told, still held out with great devotion in isolated positions, but by eight o'clock that morning Kemmel Hill was entirely cut off. This was a severe menace to their comrades at Locre and southwards, because both their flanks were threatened. They did heroic things to safeguard their right and left, which again and again the enemy tried to pass.

I have already told in a previous message how a gallant French officer and a small company of men made a counter-attack at Dranoutre, and held the post there against all odds. Up by Locre the commandant of the left battalion found machine-gun fire sweeping his left flank, and his men had to face left to defend their line. Small parties of

Germans with machine-guns kept filtering down from the north, and established themselves on the railway in order to rake the French with enfilade fire. One French company, led by devoted officers, counter-attacked there five times with the bayonet, into the sweep of those bullets, and, by this sacrifice, saved their flank. Another company advanced to hold the hospice. There was desperate fighting day after day, so that its ruins, if any bits of wall are left, will be as historic as the château at Vermelles, or other famous houses of the battlefields. French and Germans took it turn and turn about, and although the enemy sent great numbers of men to garrison this place they were never able to hold it long, because always some young French lieutenant and a handful of men stormed it again, and routed the enemy. When it was taken last, on April 29, the day of the enemy's severe defeat, the French captured 100 prisoners in cellars there, and they belonged to fourteen battalions of four regiments of three divisions, showing the amazing way in which the enemy's divisions had been flung into confusion by the French fire.

"There were ten big shells a second," one of these officers told me, "and that lasted with only two short pauses for six days all through the battle, and other shells were uncountable."

The enemy had brought up light artillery and trench-mortars almost to his front lines in Dranoutre Wood and other places, and attempted to take the French in enfilade fire from Kemmel. But by this time many French guns were in position reinforcing the British artillery, and on the 28th they opened up, and killed great numbers of the enemy.

Allied aviators saw long columns of Germans on the roads by Neuve Eglise, and in Dranoutre Wood, and signalled to the guns to range on these human targets. The guns answered. Masses of Germans were smashed by the fire, and panic-stricken groups were seen running out of Dranoutre Wood.

That night the Germans seemed to be relieving their

troops, and again French and British guns flung shells into them, and for the enemy it was a night of death and horror. But next day, the 29th, the enemy made reply by a prolonged bombardment, more intense even than before, and then attacked with new troops all along the line.

But the French also had many fresh troops in the line—not those I met yesterday—who at two o'clock in the morning went forward into the attack and took back the village. This defeated the enemy's plan of turning the French left, and all through that day the enemy's desperate efforts to break through were shattered, and that night the French held exactly the same ground as before and had caused enormous losses to the German divisions—at least 40 per cent. of their strength as it is reckoned on close evidence. That night even the German guns stopped their drumfire as though Sixt von Armin's army was in mourning for its dead.

The Germans have added one terror to battle which was taught them by us in the battles of Flanders last year. From the air they sent over swarms of low-flying aeroplanes, from 10 to a 100 yards above the ground, and their pilots fired on the French infantry in the open with machine-guns, and dropped heavy bombs. "I counted some seventy-nine aeroplanes in the sky at one time over two battalion fronts," said one of the officers whom I met yesterday, and his friends bore out this fact. They told me all these things frankly and simply, with fine modesty and open-heartedness.

Their great pride was in the glory of their men. They touched the papers, which had been delivered by the runners, with reverence as relics of the brave dead, and they stood very silent when the old colonel, who was like a father among them, took another paper out of his pocket, and smoothed it out, and, clearing his throat a little, said, "I had this from a young lieutenant of mine commanding a platoon, and I would like to read it to you."

It was a message from a young French officer who with a little party of men was isolated for two days with the

enemy all round them. For two days they kept the Germans at bay with machine-gun fire, fighting north and south, facing both ways, and he had the honour to report —this boy of France—that he had not lost a foot of ground nor one man as a prisoner.

"There must have been many things done like that," said the colonel, "but the men who did them have not come back, and we shall never know."

On the same day as the French were holding firm between Dranoutre and Locre, our men of the 21st, 49th, and 25th Divisions were sustaining the same ordeal northwards between Voormezeele and Ridge Wood. I have already given many details of this fighting, describing the colossal bombardment, the attacks of the enemy in waves, and our slaughter of his men. He was never able to get into Ridge Wood, and on the previous night, when he tried to advance on a big scale, but was prevented by our gun-fire, which broke up his assemblies, the South Africans attacked and drove him back by machine-gun and rifle fire. The Yorks and Lancashires and the Duke of Wellingtons received the enemy with fixed bayonets, and inflicted heavy losses.

One fine feature of this battle, which was a defeat for the Germans, was the extraordinary gallant behaviour of some of the men of the new drafts, who came into action for the first time, stood the ordeal of intense shell-fire with wonderful stoicism, and showed a gallant spirit in attack. One party of them actually attacked as a separate unit and did splendid work.

SATURDAY

How many days will there be before the next battle, now that nearly a week has passed without German attacks? Since that morning of April 29, when our British and French troops staggered some of the enemy's best divisions by a slaughtering fire, there has been no action but the ceaseless action of the artillery.

The lull in the big battles is only because the enemy is reorganizing his divisions, rearranging and maintaining his gun-power, preparing for another phase of his offensive, which will be as formidable as the gathering of all his forces for another supreme effort can be made.

We are not making it easy for him to get on with his plans, and heavy rains have made his roads bad and filled the bogs behind him. That bombardment of ours last night, and on other nights, has beyond any question confused his arrangements, with such confusion as one sees in a neat house in Arras or Amiens when high explosives enter in and disturb the scheme of things. From prisoners and other sources we know something at least of the effect of our gun-fire over there in Albert and on the Bapaume road beyond, and up in Flanders, in old places of horror which were our places, beyond Hell Fire Corner and Hooge, and along duckboards down from Wytschaete and the tracts that go past Kemmel Hill.

The enemy has many divisions both up there in the Flemish fields and on the Somme, divisions in line and divisions in reserve—divisions crowded in reserve—and there are few roads for them down which to march, and not much elbow room for such masses to assemble, and not much cover in trenches or dug-outs from high explosives or shrapnel.

So we pound them to death, many of them to death, and many of them to stretcher cases, and reliefs coming up get wildly mixed with divisions coming down, and at night there is mad confusion in the ranks of marching men and in transport columns, which gallop past dead horses and splintered wagons and the wrecks of transport columns, and among regimental and divisional staffs trying to keep order in the German way when things are being smashed into chaos, while the Red Cross convoys are overloaded with wounded and unable to cope with all the bodies that lie about.

I believe the German plans are what they were before

March 21, only modified by the exigencies and occasions of the battle, but not changed in essential ideas. Their purpose still remains to destroy the British Army by continual sledge-hammer blows, to divide the French and British Armies as much as possible by driving in a wedge in the neighbourhood of Amiens, and with luck so to cramp us in the north by the capture of the last remaining hills in Flanders and by depriving us of the free use of the roads and railways that we may have to draw back from our northern front.

This strategy, like all good strategy, is childlike in its simplicity. It needs no enormous brain to work it out. A map on a school-room wall is good enough for Lüdendorff to draw out its lines. It is the men who have to take those lines with their bodies who have the difficult task, and those men, those German soldiers, know that every mile of the way will be another graveyard, and that strategy so simple as this means for them months more of sacrifice.

But they will have to do it. The German High Command is not going to spare them. It will pour out their blood, 40 per cent. of one battalion, 60 per cent. of another, annihilation if necessary, provided that in this great gamble of history there is a chance of winning. And apparently they still think they have that chance. Perhaps they think still, in spite of the heavy losses which they write off, that it is almost a certainty.

They have five months ahead of them this year, five months of fighting weather, and they will use them in my judgment for a series of blows interrupted only by short periods such as that now on for reorganization and preparation.

There is only one chance of avoiding these tremendous onslaughts, though many chances, I hope and believe, of thwarting them. It is the chance—a slender one, but not beyond possibility—that the German people will be so horrified by this spilling of their soldiers' blood in the frenzied desire for a decisive victory that they will rise in passion

against it, with cries against those who order it to go on.

Already the German people are beginning to realize that, notwithstanding the jubilations of their newspapers, letters from the Emperor to his generals, and the generals to their Emperor, and all the stage management of victorious drama, their losses have been frightful since March 21.

A day or two ago up in Flanders a wagon drawn by two mules dashed into our lines. Their drivers had been killed or scared by our harassing fire, and so these mules came to us. In the wagon was a German mail of unopened letters. Those letters reveal the agony, the spiritual revolt of people who understand something of the truth and see nothing but death in all this.

"Do you think you won't be coming on leave soon now? [So one letter says.] It's high time you got away, for it is past your turn. Oh! how much longer is it all going to last? It is full time the wicked humbug of it were at an end. In the last few days we have had news of the death of five relatives in the big offensive. It is frightful, and still no sign of peace. The world is full of sorrow and misery. If only this wicked war would end—this murder cease. A youngster from here has just been killed, and he would have been nineteen in May. Oh, what a cost and how much more to pay before the end!"

In another letter there is this same wail of grief:

"You can imagine that there is no rest for me in these times, and all my thoughts are taken up by the new offensive and all that it will cost. Karl has been killed. What a shame it is, but we can do nothing to make things any better. Peace doesn't seem to be coming along as we have fondly hoped. All this in the West is too wicked for anything, and we are full of worry and anxiety. A whole crowd out hereabouts have had news of the death of their men-folk. It's too awful for anything. Four years of it now, and no sign of the end. We hope every day that it will come to a decision, and that the English will be driven into the North Sea, but they stand firm."

Meanwhile the war goes on and will go on. This morning early our guns doubled their usual dose of harassing fire, and kept the enemy's roads and assembly places under fierce bursts of shelling, so that other deaths will be notified in German villages. And the enemy's guns were very active along our front all day yesterday in Flemish villages like Fletre and La-Motte and Hazebrouck and Vlamertinghe, with its skeleton church; then in the Lens area by Gavrelle and Arleux, and further south above Albert, along the Ancre.

Round about Locre French troops have made a few small gains in raids and patrol actions, capturing some ruined farms and houses and some high ground south of Koudekot. The gun-fire hardly ceases round about Locre itself and about the hospice there, where, as I have described, there was bitter fighting, so that the place was taken and lost and retaken several times by the French with small parties of "Poilus" led by young officers with most gallant courage. I knew this hospice well, and it will interest many people to be reminded that in the garden there Major Willie Redmond was buried after the Battle of Wytschaete, where he fell. In the garden there on the day of his funeral there was a guard of honour of Ulster soldiers and Nationalist soldiers, and among the generals and Staff officers the reverend mother and her nuns to whom the hospice belonged. They laid flowers on his grave, and went back then into the long refectory, where Irish soldiers used to dine, waited upon by these good women who, as a sign of their love for Ireland, had painted on their walls the Irish harp, and next to it the Red Hand of Ulster and the little shamrock, with the lily flower of France. Redmond's grave was quiet in the garden when we went away from it, and birds were singing in the bushes. Now the hospice is a ruin, and the nuns have fled and the garden has been trampled down by the feet of fighting men, and near Redmond's grave lie other bodies of the dead.

VIII

The Falure of the German Offensive

May 6

The lull continues, and yesterday was the quietest day on the Front, perhaps, that we have had since March 21.

I described yesterday how our intense harassing fire in Flanders and elsewhere has caused much damage to the enemy, and has undoubtedly interfered a good deal with his organization behind the lines, making it difficult for him to relieve and reorganize his divisions, to bring up his ammunition, and to gather all the supplies he needs for the next phase of his offensive. This destructive fire of ours is causing the same effect down across the Somme, where the Australians especially have during recent days made life very wretched for the German troops.

The Australian achievement at about 2 A.M. this morning was a very daring and successful enterprise, which must be extraordinarily annoying to the German Command in that district. Annoying is too mild a word to use for the German troops themselves, because for an hour or more it must have been a time of terror for them, and many poor wretches were killed before the light of day.

The Australians went over in no great numbers for such a wide front of attack, which was about 2500 yards, and without preliminary bombardment, though as soon as they were away their guns were active neutralizing the enemy's batteries and keeping his roads and tracks under fire to prevent supports getting up.

The German garrison on this front belonged to the 199th Division and 145th Division, and they were scattered about, not in any definite trench system, but in rifle pits and slit trenches just big enough to give cover to small groups and outposts and machine-gun crews. The Australians went over and routed out the German pits and holes with

bayonets and bombs. The Germans fought for their lives in some of these places, but at least 150 were killed according to the estimate of Australian officers, and the prisoners now number 200 of the 114th and 357th Infantry Reserve Regiments. They include two officers, whom I saw this morning, and who looked very haggard and worn young men, with gaunt cheeks under their big shrapnel helmets, which reached down to their shoulders. Among the trophies brought back by the Australians, whose own losses were extraordinarily light, were several machine-guns and a big trench-mortar. It was more than a raid, for the Australian line is now advanced on this side of Morlancourt to a depth of 850 yards on that wide front of 2500 yards. It is an enterprise which will remind the enemy that the initiative and the offensive spirit are not entirely on his side. It is, however, only a minor action, compared with the battles last month and those which will come this month when the enemy is again ready to try another big smash.

MAY 8

IN spite of great gun-fire last night and early this morning there seems to have been no infantry action on any large scale along our front, though I hear of a small enterprise by the Australians, who have again pushed forward their line near Morlancourt, and also a hostile attack on about a two-mile front south of Dickebusch Lake (south of Ypres), where, according to early reports, the enemy has gained a footing in our forward defences.

The continual rumbling of great guns, a loud, persistent thundery beating of the air from various sectors of the front, was last night so oppressive to the nerves that it was impossible to avoid the thought that it was the prelude to another immense battle. And again this morning after dawn those awful guns were at work, as they had been murmuring for hours through one's sleep, and one wakened

with the belief that this day was to be one of terrific conflict.

Yet no news came over the wires or anyhow. Questions were asked along all sectors. "Anything doing with you?" "Any attack in your parts?"

And from these centres of information came back the answer:

"Not guilty—quite quiet about here to-day."

Quite quiet, but with loud noise of fire from many of our heavies doing their usual routine work of strafing German roads and assembly places and ammunition dumps and batteries.

Meanwhile there are wonderful May days after heavy rain, and the fields of France this side of crater land are a song of colour, with a tapestry of all the flowers that Ronsard put into his poems in the May days of French history, before high explosives had been invented.

THURSDAY

IT is not everywhere easy for the enemy to assemble his troops or concentrate his guns and ammunition stores on his front for the next phase of his offensive. Albert is a case in point.

From many points we have complete observation of his positions there, as he has of ours from the other side of the way, and needless to say we are making use of this direct view by flinging over storms of shells whenever his transport is seen crawling along the tracks of the old Somme battlefields, or his troops are seen massing among their shell-craters.

The town of Albert itself, where once until recent history the Golden Virgin used to lean downwards with her babe outstretched above the ruins, is now a death-trap for the German garrisons there and for any German gunners who try to hide their batteries among the red-brick houses.

By day and night we pound their positions with high explosives, and soak them in asphyxiating gas. I went within

2000 yards of it yesterday, and looked down into that place through which I passed hundreds of times during the Somme battles and afterwards, so that every broken house and factory and wall was familiar to me there, and I saw our heavies at work upon it. It was a wonderful May day, as to-day, and the sun shone through a golden haze upon that town in the valley and upon the barren land above it—and for miles around it—which two years ago was swept and blasted by enormous shell-fire. The Golden Virgin has gone, but the church tower still stands, all torn and jagged, with its red and white brickwork horribly mangled. It was always an ugly little town, with its modern brick houses and straight-lined factories, but it meant much to us as a place of historic memories, because all our armies passed at some time or another through its narrow streets, and the sinister desolation of its Grande Place—looking up for a moment at that strange leaning figure of Divine Motherhood—to the fields of fire beyond.

So as I looked into Albert yesterday and saw our shells smashing through, and then away up the Albert-Bapaume road, past the white rim of the great mine-crater of La Boiselle to the treeless slopes of Posières, and over all that ground of pits and ditches to High Wood on the distant right, with its few dead stumps of trees, it was hard to believe—even though I knew—that all this was in the area of the German army, that the white winding lines freshly marked upon this bleak landscape were new German trenches, and that the enemy's outposts were less than 2000 yards from where I stood. Some siege gunners lying on their stomachs and observing the enemy's lines for some monsters I had seen on the way up—monsters that raised their snouts slowly like elephants' trunks before bellowing out with an earthquake roar, annihilating all one's senses for a second—passed the remark to me that Albert isn't the town it was, and that Fritz must be having a thin time there. They also expressed the opinion that the Albert-Bapaume road was not a pleasant walk for Germans on a

sunny afternoon. I did not dispute these points with them, for they are beyond argument. Our big shells were smashing into Albert and its neighbourhood from many heavy batteries, raising volcanic explosions there, and our shrapnel was bursting over the tracks in white splashes.

One of the gunners, lying flat on his stomach with telephone to his ear, raised himself a little and said, "They're going to do a shoot, with an aeroplane to spot for them." I saw the bird come out for this job, flying low through a blue sky, and not flurried because German Archies began to send black bursts about its wings.

The siege gunners were chatty again. "Fritz got it in the neck the other evening," said one of them. "All the guns ceased fire, and a swarm of our aeroplanes came out —more than fifty of them—and dropped bombs on an assembly of German troops down there and battery positions. They made some fine rosy clouds when the red-brick ruins went up in dust. It was a great sight."

There was a great noise yesterday, but it was mostly our noise, for which I was duly thankful. Scores of our heavies were scattered about behind the lines, where the woods are in the first glory of their green, all light and feathery in the sun, and where the grass was merry with gold and silver, except where German shells had opened deep pits, horribly fresh, so that one knew the enemy had been searching around here for any death he could find.

I described in my message yesterday how the noise of gun-fire was so steady and loud during the night and early morning over a wide extent of the front that along all sectors of it there were inquiries as to attacks, answered by assurances that there was nothing doing. But, after all, there was something doing against one body of our troops in Flanders, and, judging from later information gained by our officers there, it looks as though the enemy had intended a big attack by at least five divisions, though the plan was thwarted by our intense gun-fire.

What actually happened was an assault upon Ridge

Wood and its neighbourhood, north of Vierstraat, on the French left, opposite Kemmel Hill, extending along the lines of the French themselves, though not so heavily except in artillery fire. That was intense, prolonged, and terrific for several hours of the night and just before dawn.

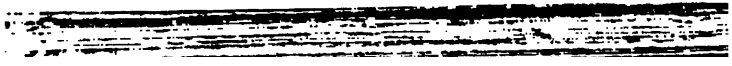
Behind the German lines, as we now know, a new German division previously untouched in this offensive—the 52nd Reserve—had just relieved the 3rd Guards, who, as I have already told, have been badly mauled with their Cockchafers in recent fighting, and on their left—our right, of course—there was the 56th German Division, with others opposite the French front. All these men were crowded into narrow assembly grounds, and they did not have quiet hours before the moment of attack. They had hours of carnage in the darkness. British and French guns were answering back the German bombardment with the heaviest fire. French howitzers and long-muzzled fellows, which during recent weeks I have seen crawling through Flanders with the "Cornflowers," as the French soldiers call themselves, crowded about them on gun-limbers and transport wagons, and muddy horses, who have travelled long kilometres, were now in action from their emplacements between the ruined villages of the Flemish war zone, and with their little brothers, the *soixante-quinzes*, their bloodthirsty little brothers, were savage in their destructive and harassing fire.

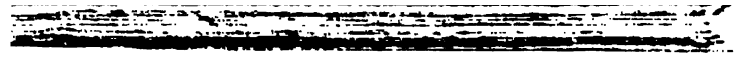
I have seen the *soixante-quinze* at work, and have heard the *rafale des tambours de la mort*, the "ruffle of the drums of death," as the sound of their fire is described by all soldier writers of France. It was that fire, that slashing and sweeping fire, which helped to break up any big plan of attack against the French troops yesterday morning, so from those assembly places a great part of the German infantry never moved all day, but spent their time it seems carrying back their wounded.

So it was with another division of German troops intended for an assault on our lines further north. Our

batteries and heavies laid down a protective barrage of shell-fire of terrible intensity, and here also any German plan of movement was "immobilized," a scientific word for slaughter and the destruction of hostile preparations. But in spite of the bombardment on the 52nd Reserve Division, those German troops, in their first baptism of fire in this offensive, came out against our men in Ridge Wood. Our forward system of trenches there had been wrecked by German shelling, and our line had been withdrawn from it, in order to save life, to positions behind the wood, where our machine-gunners had a good field of fire and where it was better to organize counter-attacks. As the German soldiers advanced they were sprayed by machine-gun fire, so that many fell, but were able to take the line of upheaved trenches and to penetrate Ridge Wood. That is all. Our old trenches gave them no cover. Ridge Wood gave them no hiding-place, for it is only a collection of tattered tree-stumps, and those Germans lay out there, losing more men as the hours passed. Then in the evening some of our men—Seaforths, I think—made a counter-attack, clearing the enemy out of the wood and back beyond our original line.

It was not a good day for those German divisions in Flanders—one more fresh division has been scorched—and it is worse for them, because very likely they may have to try again in order to carry out the plans of their High Command, who are anxious to get this ground in order to make an easier way up to Ypres, which, as I have already said, they are anxious to get for political advertisement, though there is little of military value in its ruins, except the memory of our gallant dead and of all those who have walked through its sinister streets to Hell Fire Corner and the fields across the Menin road.





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